Spring 2005

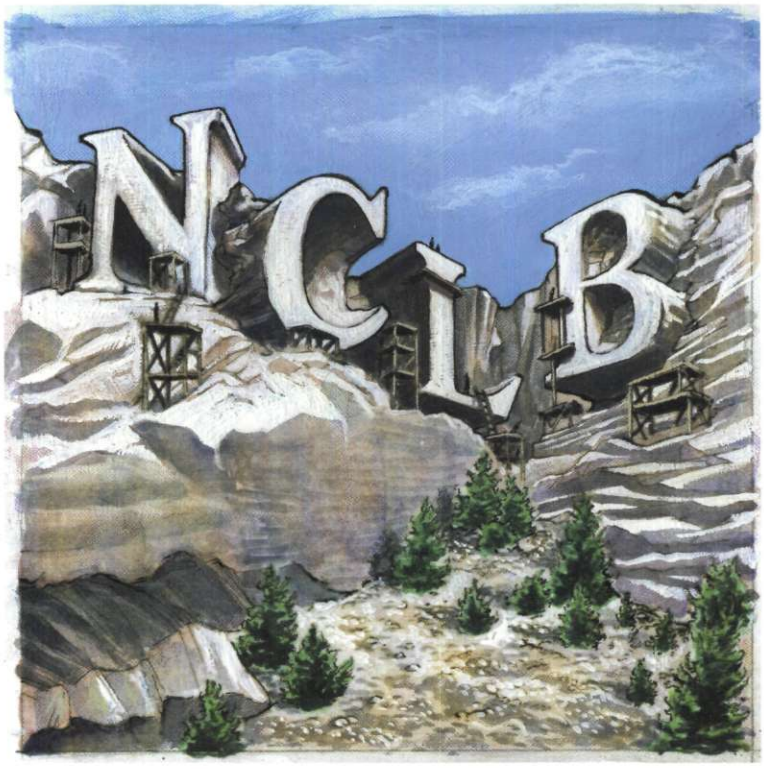
# EDUCATION next

A JOURNAL OF OPINION AND RESEARCH

## Do We Repair the Monument?

*Debating the Future of No Child Left Behind*

JOHN CHUBB, ROBERT LINN, KATI HAYCOCK, AND ROSS WIENER




**IN THIS ISSUE:**

*A Mandate to Teach Character, Math Wars, Uncivil Disobedience, Why the Brightest Women Aren't Teaching, Paying Kids to Do Well, Mel Levine's Mind*

**CONTRIBUTORS:** WILLIAM DAMON, BARRY GARELICK, JAMES LOPACH, JEAN LUCKOWSKI, CHRISTINE ROSSELL, CAROLINE HOXBY, MICHAEL KREMER, EDWARD MIGUEL, DANIEL WILLINGHAM, MARTIN WEST

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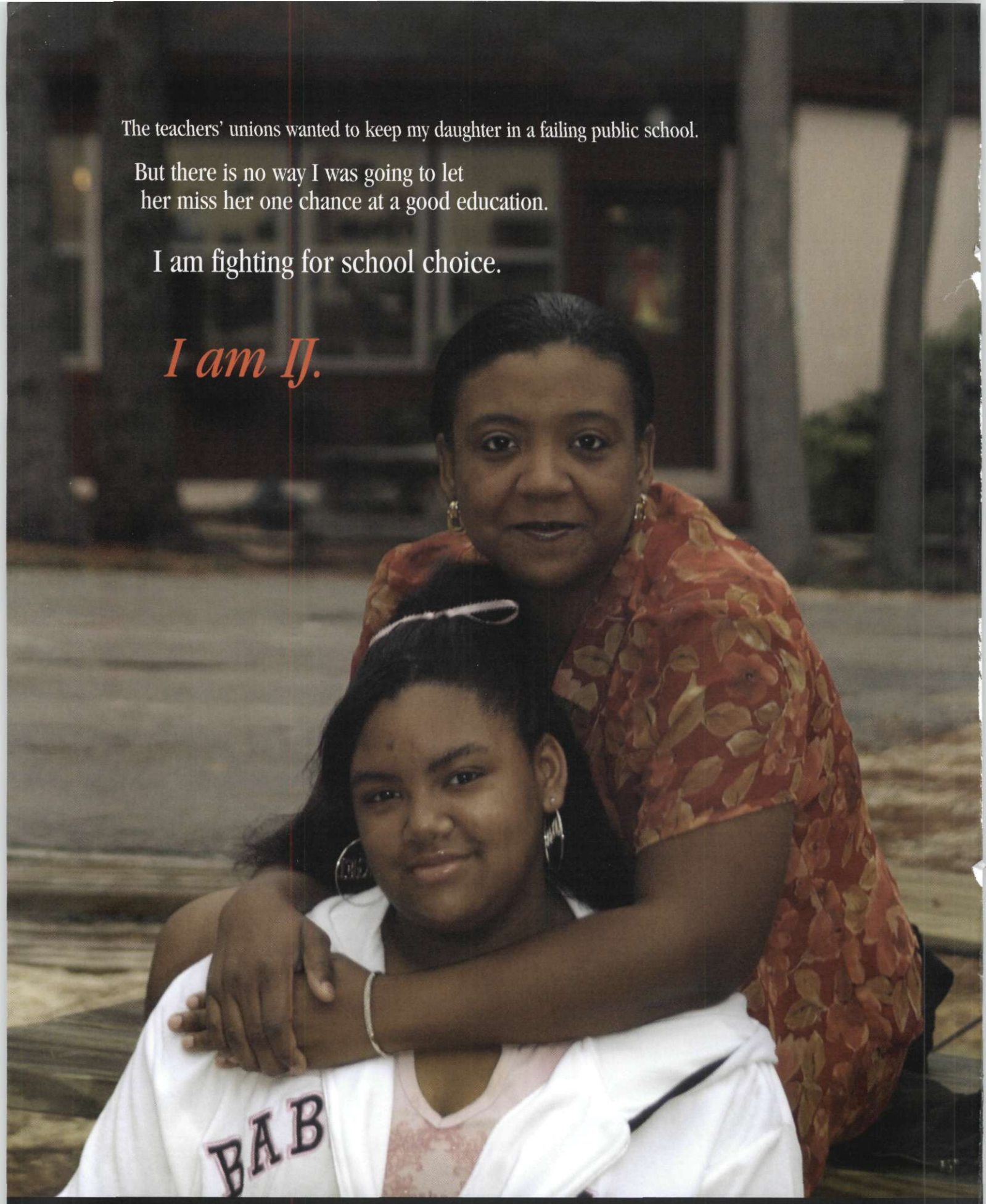
The teachers' unions wanted to keep my daughter in a failing public school.
But there is no way I was going to let her miss her one chance at a good education.
I am fighting for school choice.
I am IJ.
BAB

*Tracy Richardson and Khaliah Clanton*
*Pensacola, Florida*

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*School choice litigation*

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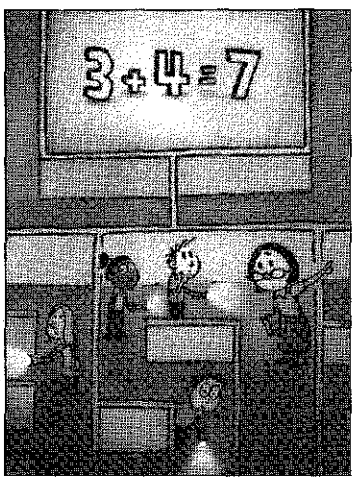

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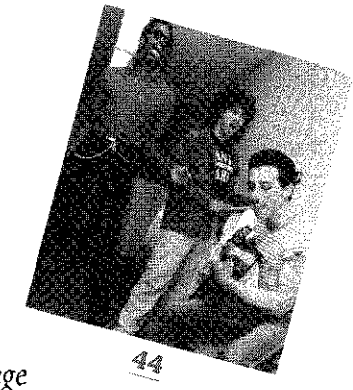
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# The Children Left Behind

## *NCLB is a Giant Step Forward—but a Mid-course Correction is Needed*

Now it is certain, on its third anniversary, that No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is a monumental achievement. The accountability provisions of the law shine a bright light on the performance of schools across the nation, forcing many of them to attend to long-ignored problems.

But new evidence confirms what was known when the law was passed: Fixing the American education system is an even more monumental task. Just as this issue was going to press, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) released the results of its latest triennial international math and reading survey, this one undertaken in 2003, the year NCLB was being fully implemented. American 15-year-olds, according to the report, ranked 24th in math among the students from 29 industrialized countries who were given the tests.

Given these results, President Bush is absolutely correct to focus on the American high school as the next target for reform. Students in the best-performing European and Asian countries must take well-defined examinations to achieve graduation. But most American high school students, to get a diploma, only have to earn barely passing grades until they finish their 12th year.

Externally set graduation examinations need to be the first order of business for Margaret Spellings, the new secretary of education. This will require a clear change in NCLB policy.

Up until now, NCLB has held schools accountable but has expected nothing directly from students. Instead, it treats pupils as widgets, objects to be manipulated by teachers, parents, and school administrators. Yet in the end adults can only guide and encourage youngsters, who must learn to take responsibility for their own education.

For that to happen, students should be told what material they need to learn, what examinations they need to pass, and what level they need to achieve on the exam if they are to earn the recognition that will give them access to decent jobs and good colleges.

Nor can the Bush administration push high school reform without at the same time repairing other defects in NCLB. Although the law does shine an intense light on school performance, that light is filtered by lenses that distort what is happening inside schoolrooms.

For one thing, the law requires only that schools make progress toward the proficiency standard established by each state. Once a student crosses the proficiency bar, the school has no incentive to encourage further improvement. The school can ignore the high-flying student and still win NCLB approval.

Yet the OECD study shows that the top students are flying low. Only 5 percent of Americans performed at the highest math level—compared with nearly a quarter of Finns, Koreans, Japanese, and Dutch. (For some of the reasons why, see in this issue the feature essay on the new "new math" by Barry Garelick, page 28.) Such a scandalously low performance leaves the country's future at the mercy of the ever better educated competition beyond our borders (see review essay by Martin West).

Externally set graduation examinations need to be the first order of business for Margaret Spellings, the new secretary of education. This will require a clear change in NCLB policy.

Other changes in NCLB are needed as well. For one thing, definitions of proficiency vary widely from one state to another—and in most states fall well below the standards established by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. (For details, see the figures and discussion in this issue's *Forum*, page 8).

Also, schools should be held accountable for the gains of individual students. To do this effectively, states must create an information system that allows them to track individual student progress, then hold students, teachers, schools, and districts to account.

NCLB is a monumental first step. But it is only the first step. Much more needs to be done if the promise of accountability is to be fulfilled.

– PAUL E. PETERSON

**MISSION STATEMENT** In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K-12 education, but *Education Next* partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.



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## Tough Love at the Hyde Schools

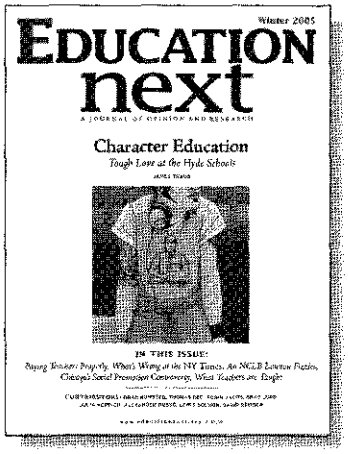
Shortly after his initial visit, I asked James Traub whether he planned to evaluate Hyde according to how effectively we honor our mission or on the basis of how closely we embody his perception of the good school. Reflecting the latter, Traub's "The Moral Imperative" (*Features*, Winter 2005) is a thoughtful piece on a complex subject. I write to fill in a few gaps.

His education worldview focused tightly through the window of the classroom, Traub naturally begins with a classroom drama. Although his depiction of the scene might be familiar to Hyde students and faculty, the accompanying illustration is so incongruous to their experience that they have uniformly wondered if the drawing was intended to apply to another article in the magazine. (For one thing, any Hyde student would tell the kid in the front, "No hats in the building!")

In examining the Hyde "ship," Traub's bias (that is, school = classroom) prevented him from setting foot into its powerful engine room: the Hyde Family Education Program. Hyde's 40-year trial-and-error quest to discover the best way to develop character has led us to our most significant discovery: good teaching will invariably lose out to poor parenting. The dynamics within our families can either catapult us to personal greatness or chain us to desperate dysfunction. Traub's decision to disregard Hyde's family education program prevented him from seeing what makes the place tick.

While Hyde's holistic balance of academics, character, and family is undoubtedly at odds with Mr. Traub's preferences, Traub misleads the reader when he suggests that Hyde has abandoned academic requirements for graduation. Our enterprising culture did indeed lead us to a brief flirtation with this notion in our earliest days. However, stringent traditional requirements have been in place for more than 30 years.

I must strenuously object to at least two examples of the writer's tendency




toward broad-brush characterizations. His depiction of the members of the Hyde community as "wounded souls" is both inaccurate and unfair. Character development is good for both wounded souls and confident ones. Both can be found at Hyde. He also goes way over the line in claiming that

> Hyde's 40-year trial-and-error quest to discover the best way to develop character has led us to our most significant discovery: good teaching will invariably lose out to poor parenting.

the "Hyde content" has been drained out of Hyde-New Haven. Suffice it to say that Mr. Traub neither visited the school nor spoke with anyone who works there.

The mathematician would categorize as "necessary but not sufficient" his reference to Hyde as a family "caste." To be sure, the Gauld family has long had a heavy hand in the leadership of Hyde. However, Mr. Traub fails to mention that three of Hyde's four schools are led by individuals with no familial ties to the Gaulds. There are no family members on Hyde's board of governors, the authority to which all four of those teams report.

Pointing to our 100 percent college acceptance rate at Hyde-DC (all four schools combined annually attain 98 percent), Traub seems begrudging when he offers that we "must be doing something right." We offer him a standing invitation to take a hard look at our "engine room" should he want to discover the nature of that something.

MALCOLM GAULD
*President, Hyde Schools*

## Chicago's Proven Results

Regarding your two stories about Chicago's ending of social promotion ("Retaining Retention" and "Teachers and Students Speak," *Features*, Winter 2005), it should be noted that one of the most important policy decisions that Chicago mayor Richard M. Daley made when he took control of the public schools in 1995 was to end social promotions.

Before then, the high school dropout rate was almost 16 percent; the percentage of our elementary students meeting national norms on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills in reading was less than 37; the percentage of our students testing in the bottom quarter was about 32. But things have changed. By 2003 the dropout rate had fallen to 13 percent, the percentage of students meeting national norms was up to 41, and the percentage of students testing in the bottom quartile was down to about 24—better than the nation as a whole. This is all to say that we see retention as a tool to help students get the help they need. And it works.

Your articles note many of these facts, but it must be pointed out that the key to making retention effective is to



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recognize it as a warning sign and fix the problem. This year, we have refined our policy to require that a personalized learning plan be designed for each student retained, so that the principal, teacher, and parents can all monitor the child's progress.

These students also work with specially trained teachers. And previously retained 4th and 7th graders now have access to extra learning opportunities after school and during the summer to make sure they stay on track.

We also are working to prevent retentions before they even occur, by targeting high-retention schools and implementing an intensive literacy program in the early grades. We already have more than 30,000 preschool slots systemwide and have expanded this program into full-day kindergarten in targeted schools.

We look forward to a day when no children are retained, not because they are simply passed along without scrutiny, but because they have mastered the skills and concepts needed for their grade level. On that day, we will know that we truly have served every child in every school.

ARNE DUNCAN
*Chief Executive Officer*
*Chicago Public Schools*

## Teaching Teachers

However flawed David Steiner's study of the syllabi and texts used in three clusters of teacher education courses (foundational studies, reading, and methods of teaching), we agree with his basic argument that future teachers need more exposure to the three millennia of writings about schooling and education ("Skewed Perspective: What We Know about Teacher Preparation at Elite Education Schools," *Features*, Winter 2005).

Unfortunately, given the current realities of mandated courses and prescribed curricula, this is impossible to achieve. For more than 30 years the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) has pleaded for more "life space" for teacher education in the college curriculum, including five-year and fifth-year teacher education programs. Confined to the undergraduate curriculum, teacher education has surrendered space—once occupied by foundational studies—to courses in the technical aspects of teaching and learning and to more clinical practice.

Steiner faults courses in teacher education for what he perceives as ideological bias—specifically, for their contemporary and Western orientation. Given the minimalist curriculum assigned by the state, however, the wonder is that the syllabi have as much as they do. Faculty members do have choices to make, but the conversations at the AACTE are about "dispositional knowledge" and how to engage prospective teachers in the debates about liberalism and education.

Steiner insists that he wants teachers who are liberally educated, but his rush to judgment may produce the opposite effect: the state's imposing an even more prescribed curriculum. Steiner is playing to the "new right monopoly" in education and setting the conditions that could lead to mandates for a sterile, neutral, and value-free preparation of teachers. Nothing could be more damaging to the (classical) liberalism that Steiner and AACTE are seeking.

DAVID IMIG
*President and CEO*
*AACTE*

In "Skewed Perspective," David Steiner makes a valid claim about the ideology of American education schools, but he misreads its significance.

As the syllabi for teacher education courses suggest, there is indeed an ideological consensus around pedagogical progressivism in education schools, but it has had little serious impact on teaching and learning in American schools. It was that other branch of education progressivism, the administrative progressives, who shaped the form and function of American schools in the 20th century. Following the credo of social efficiency rather than inquiry learning, they created the modern education bureaucracy and a radically differentiated curriculum, complete with vocational rationale, dumbed-down courses, and a focus on life adjustment more than academic learning.

Research from inside and outside the ed school consistently shows that teacher education is an extraordinarily weak intervention in the process of socializing teachers, whose main influences are a long apprenticeship of observation as K–12 students before entering teacher education and the powerful culture of the school in which they begin to teach.

As for education professors, our primary accomplishment as acolytes of pedagogical progressivism has been to change the rhetoric of educators, who have all come to talk like constructivists. But beyond this talk—and a few formalistic changes, like placing desks in clusters instead of rows—there is little sign that the traditional teacher-centered mode of instruction has changed significantly in the past one hundred years.

Yes, education schools are ideologically convergent in ways that are intellectually unhealthy. But instead of beating the dead horse of education school ideology, researchers might better spend their time trying to figure out which forms of teacher preparation best enhance student learning.

DAVID F. LABAREE
*Professor, School of Education*
*Stanford University*

**David Steiner replies:**
Regarding David Imig: The point of my research was not that foundations courses are missing, but that their content is generally shallow and ideologically slanted. Teacher preparation programs unquestionably face time pressure, but Imig makes the unwarranted inference



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Skewed Perspective

What We Know about Teacher Preparation at Elite Education Schools

that more course work would produce better-balanced reading lists. This contradicts common sense: surely, to do more of what is being done poorly is not a winning proposition. The case for devoting more time to teacher preparation can only be made if we are ready to correct the deficiencies in teacher preparation that my study reveals. As for Imig's opening rhetorical gesture, my research analyzes 165 syllabi—45 in foundations—from a representative sample of elite schools. Imig does not claim, or even suggest, that a larger sample would bring different results. Rather, in his eagerness to belittle my findings, he shows a defensiveness that raises concerns about the capacity of teacher education to reform itself.

Professor Labaree doesn't dispute my methodology or my findings, but questions their significance on the grounds that teacher preparation is inconsequential. This would seem to argue for abandoning teacher preparation; yet Labaree calls for further research, implying that if we knew how to prepare teachers, then teacher preparation would have an impact. However, in claiming that meaningful preparation is yet to be found, he not only sidesteps my argument that teachers should be taught to think through intellectual and moral issues related to pedagogy, but also a long history of reflection on the aims, methods, and content of education. Moreover, if teacher preparation is to remain in business in the hope that it becomes consequential, then it surely matters that this preparation ceases to be ideologically biased.

## Reading, Writing, and Willpower

I liked Diane Ravitch's review of Paul Zoch's *Doomed to Fail* (Winter 2005), which I also read with great interest. The myopia that overlooks student effort is, in my view, the biggest flaw in our current approach to education reform. Teachers, and teachers of teachers, tend to focus on what teachers do, not on what students do.

**The myopia that overlooks student effort is, in my view, the biggest flaw in our current approach to education reform.**

This reminds me of a story I heard Al Shanker [longtime president of the American Federation of Teachers] tell a couple of times:

Apparently, when Jaime Escalante moved to Sacramento, the local media were anxious to find out how good this famous teacher was. They found a 9th-grade student who said he was a lousy teacher.

Fascinated, they asked her why. She said she had had a problem with her algebra and went to Mr. Escalante for help. He kept her after school for several days and also on Saturday.

The media asked her what happened.

"Well," she said, "I finally got it, but he didn't teach me anything. All he did was make me work!"

WILL FITZHUGH
*Founder*
The Concord Review

## What's a Teacher Worth?

In "The Uniform Salary Schedule" (*Forum*, Winter 2005), Brad Jupp cites Public Agenda research and identifies us as a "pro-teacher group." While I believe most of us at Public Agenda admire teachers, Public Agenda is a nonpartisan, nonadvocacy research organization, and we don't endorse a particular strategy for any group.

Mr. Jupp cites Public Agenda's report on American public school teachers, our 2004 study "Stand by Me: What Teachers Really Think about Unions, Merit Pay, and Other Professional Matters." In this study we found fairly broad support among teachers for some forms of differential pay—just not the form that ties pay directly to student test scores. But the research also suggests, at least among teachers nationally, that differential pay is just not an especially strong motivator or a top priority for most teachers. Beyond that, our surveys of superintendents and principals have shown strong support for reform of both salary and tenure.

RUTH A. WOODEN
*President*
*Public Agenda*



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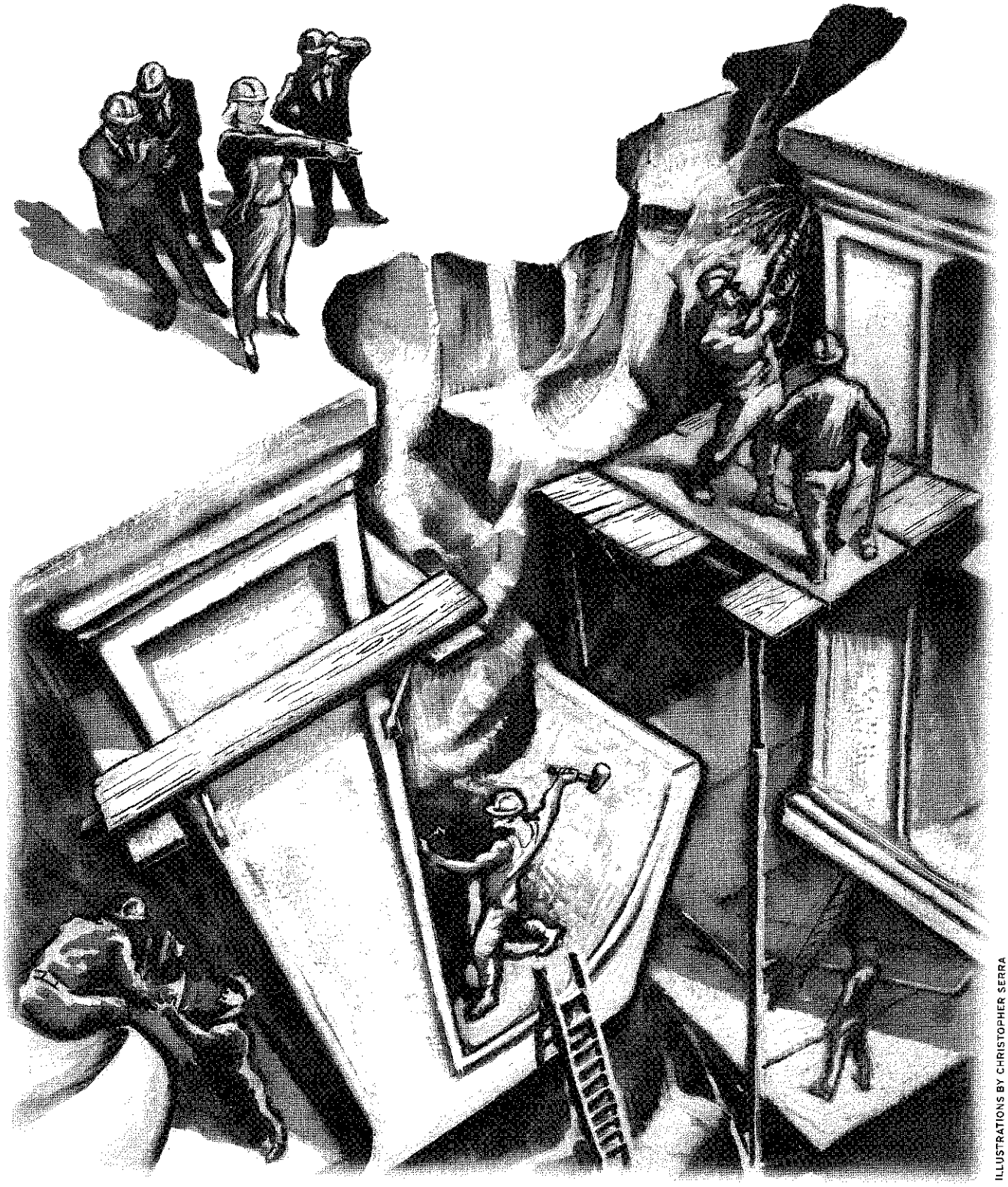

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# Repair the Monument?

## Debating the Future of No Child Left Behind

With the re-election of George W. Bush and the appointment of Margaret Spellings as his new secretary of education, many are wondering whether now is the time to revisit No Child Left Behind. The historic law, passed by Congress with broad, bipartisan support and signed by the President in January of 2002, introduced significant new systems of accountability into American education. While the law continues to have broad backing, school boards, administrators, and analysts from across the political spectrum have raised questions about many of its provisions.

"We've made great progress in our schools," said President Bush, as he nominated Spellings last November 17. But even the president, the law's strongest supporter, said at the time, "There is more work to do."

*Education Next* invited four leading analysts to share their opinions about what has been learned in the three years since NCLB was enacted. John Chubb, a member of the Koret Task Force and our editorial board, calls for changes in the definitions of Adequate Yearly Progress. Robert Linn, a professor of education and former editor of the *Journal of Educational Measurement*, believes that the law sets "unrealistically high" standards. And Kati Haycock and Ross Wiener of the Education Trust caution against too much legislative tinkering, preferring administrative action instead. "Right now," they argue, "energy should be focused on making NCLB work better."

We began by asking them to state, in general...

JOHN CHUBB(JC)

ROBERT LINN(RL)

KATI HAYCOCK(KH)

ROSS WIENER(RW)

### Q: Is this law fundamentally good for America?

**John Chubb (JC):** Yes. With the enactment of NCLB, the United States may have taken a historic stride toward improving American education. NCLB is not like any federal education law before it. It sets ambitious goals for what all students in America will learn and authorizes radical measures to achieve them.

**Robert Linn (RL):** The law has much that is worthy of praise, particularly its emphasis on all children and the special attention it gives to improving learning for children who have been too often ignored or left behind in the past. The emphasis on closing the achievement gap is certainly praiseworthy. Other positives include the encouragement given to states to adopt ambitious subject-matter standards and to enhance teacher quality.



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**Kati Haycock and Ross Wiener (H/W):** The bipartisan coalition that passed NCLB demanded that states pick up the pace of reform—that they take their own standards more seriously, provide more honest information to the public on progress, and tackle the deeply inequitable provision of education within their borders. These demands were absolutely necessary and long overdue, and they should be allowed a fair chance to work before being significantly modified.

## Q: How does NCLB differ from its predecessors?

**JC:** NCLB is based on principles that are fundamentally different from those that have historically driven public education. First, there's accountability. Schools are required to ensure that all of their students achieve proficiency in reading and math according to a set schedule. If they don't, they face sanctions. The important difference is that schools are accountable not for *delivering* education to students, the historical norm, but for actually *educating* them—and to high academic standards.

Second, transparency. NCLB requires states to make public the scores of every public school on annual assessments for all students and for major economic, racial, ethnic, language, and special education subgroups. The law provides a window into school performance that parents, citizens, policymakers, and the media have never had.

And third, choice. Students whose schools need improvement under NCLB are given the opportunity to transfer to better public schools and to receive tutoring from outside the school system. Disadvantaged students are given a power that middle- and upper-income students have always had: to choose a better school in a different neighborhood (by moving) or to hire a private tutor. NCLB thereby injects an element of the free market into an education system that has been organized strictly on the basis of direct government provision.

**H/W:** You have to consider how much had changed between passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 and Congress's consideration of NCLB in 2000. On the one hand, education had become vastly more important to our economic prosperity and good citizenship; on the other hand, academically, the United States had fallen behind many of our international competitors.

> NCLB is not like any federal education law before it. It sets ambitious goals for what all students in America will learn and authorizes radical measures to achieve them.
>
> — Chubb

> The law has much that is worthy of praise, particularly its emphasis on improving learning for children who have been too often ignored in the past.
>
> — Linn

Additionally, you have to remember that Congress had already asked the states to step up the pace on these issues. The 1994 reauthorization of ESEA represented a paradigm shift: No longer would the government ask states and districts to account specifically for how each federal dollar was spent; instead, it would ask for demonstrable results for students of color and students living in poverty.

Far too often, though, states fell significantly short in developing the necessary assessment, accountability, and public reporting systems. Most school systems continued to perform at a level that was "good enough" on overall averages, allowing schools to hide the underperformance of some groups beneath school averages. Indeed, by the time Congress readied itself to reauthorize the law in 2000, the average reading and math skills of the nation's African-American and Latino high school seniors were identical to those of white 8th graders. So Congress acted on this information and demanded that states and school districts assert ownership over their low-performing schools and take responsibility for helping them to improve.

**RL:** I agree. The biggest difference between NCLB and earlier versions of the law is the specificity and stringency of the accountability system that states are required to put in place. All students in grades 3 through 8, and in high school, must be tested each year in reading and mathematics; intermediate achievement goals must be established. The student body as a whole, and each of several subgroups, must meet the annual achievement targets. Failure to do so invokes sanctions that become increasingly severe with continued failure to meet the targets.

## Q: Is it working?

**JC:** The evidence that accountability works is already strong. As can be seen in Figure 1, states that adopted accountability systems during the 1990s made significantly greater gains on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) than states that did not adopt such systems.

During the first full year of NCLB's implementation, 2002–03, the largest school systems in the United States—and prime targets for NCLB—nearly doubled their average rate of improvement in reading and math combined. The Council of Great City Schools, which represents large urban school systems, reports major test-score improvements and attributes them to NCLB.



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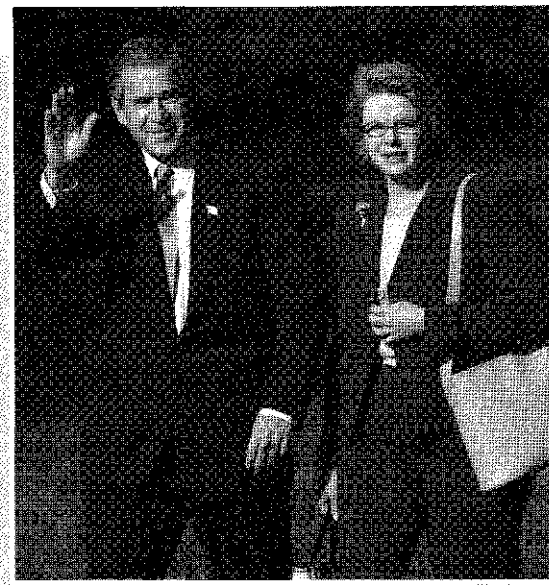
## With Chisel or Jackhammer? A Public School Pragmatist Takes on Education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When President George Bush nominated Margaret Spellings as his second-term secretary of education last November, he said, "I have relied on her intellect and judgment throughout my career in public service....She has my complete trust."

The question on most people's minds then became, Margaret Who?

The 47-year-old mother of two (stepmother of two more) had directed the White House Domestic Policy Council for the previous four years. Nonetheless, she was so far below the Beltway radar that Karl Rove, who has a reputation for controlling that radar (and a great deal more) as the president's chief political strategist, described Spellings as "the most influential woman in Washington that you've never heard of." (Rove also volunteered that, in the 1980s, he had once asked Spellings out on a date—and she had said no.)

It came as another surprise, though, even to some education watchers, that the unheralded Michigan native (she moved with her family to Houston when she was in the 3rd grade) played a principal role in the creation of the historic No Child Left Behind law. In fact, Spellings, a 1979 political science and journalism graduate of the University of Houston, has been an education advisor to Bush since 1994, when he first ran for governor of Texas. She was a lobbyist for the Texas Association of School Boards when Rove brought her onto the gubernatorial campaign.

During Bush's six years as Texas's chief executive, Spellings was a senior advisor in charge of education policy and oversaw the state's assessment and accountability system reform. She used the Texas program as a model in drafting No Child Left Behind. "The old way was to mask the problems of underachievement and move kids through the system," Spellings has said. "NCLB moves us from denial into confronting reality."

Rolling up her sleeves to join Bush's cabinet, Spellings confronts her own tough reality, that of leading the nation's education reform movement as it struggles to become the new education establishment.

"She is very bright, articulate, does her homework, and does not like to waste time," says one education observer who has known Spellings since her Texas School Boards days. "The key thing to remember is that she was a statehouse lobbyist on education and a pragmatist, not a manager, education bureaucrat, or academic policy type. And she does value public education."

Some school choice advocates worry that Spellings does not share their agenda. But for NCLB proponents and critics alike, it seems especially fitting that the woman who helped make education history should assume the crucial role in determining whether that law will produce a lasting education monument.

Undaunted, Spellings says, "I am a product of our public schools. I believe in America's schools, what they mean to each child, to each future president or future domestic policy advisor, and to the strength of our great country."

*— Morgan R. Goatley*

**H/W:** This country needed to ratchet up the focus on inequality in public education, and in that important respect the law is already working: NCLB has brought increased attention to achievement gaps and has ushered in accountability systems that make closing these gaps a top priority.

Accountability systems, of course, don't teach students—educators do. But results from state assessment systems in the first two years of implementation provide heartening evidence that more and more schools are stepping up to the challenges created by this new form of accountability. Our recent analysis of elementary achievement data from every state with comparable publicly reported data for the past three years documents that almost every state is getting more students up to and above the state's standards and that a sizable majority are narrowing gaps between groups.

"There is more work to do."
— George W. Bush

**RL:** The NCLB focus on students with low achievement seems to have had some short-term positive effects. The percentage of schools meeting Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) targets increased in 2003–04



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from the year before in most states where the results have been reported (as of early September 2004).

In many instances, however, the gains in the number of schools making the AYP is attributable to changes that some states were allowed to make in reporting criteria, such as increasing the minimum number of students in a subgroup for separate reporting or using statistical techniques that give the school the benefit of the doubt when student performance is close to the annual achievement target.

**H/W:** Nevertheless, it is particularly encouraging that some of the most impressive gap closing is occurring in states—like Virginia, North Carolina, Massachusetts, and Florida—that already had established standards-based accountability systems. These results suggest that NCLB's focus on historically underserved groups is paying dividends. To be sure, it is far too early to reach definitive conclusions about NCLB: at least several more years of state data, together with 2005 NAEP results, will be necessary. And clearly the pace of change in most states is not yet sufficient. But surely these results are too promising to abandon this approach now.

## Q: Is NCLB too rigid? Does it subvert state accountability systems?

**RL:** Several problems need to be addressed. The most serious is that the expectations for student achievement have been set unrealistically high, and as a consequence, almost all schools will fall short of the AYP targets within the next few years unless major changes are made in the definition of AYP. Performance goals mandated by the accountability system should be ambitious, but they also should be realistically obtainable with sufficient effort.

**H/W:** NCLB improves upon most state accountability plans, which relied on growth targets that set lower goals for lower-performing schools. This practice institutionalized achievement gaps. If we learned anything during the 1990s, it was that public education will not take responsibility for educating all students to state standards until schools operate under an accountability system that expects this outcome.

**RL:** At the very least, there needs to be existence of proof. That is, there should be evidence that the goal does not exceed what has previously been achieved by the students in the highest-performing schools. For example, if the best-performing 10 percent of schools had rates of improvement averaging 3 percent a year for the previous five years for students at proficient or above, then AYP for that state's schools might be defined as a 3 percent increase in students who are proficient or above each year. That would be a great challenge to the vast majority of schools, but might be a target that is within reach with sufficient effort.

**JC:** It is important to keep in mind that NCLB, contrary to popular argument, has provided a very fair and flexible definition of what constitutes 100 percent proficiency. The law provides ample allowance for students in exceptional circumstances—for example, students with serious special education needs or non-English-speaking students newly arrived in the country—to satisfy alternative standards or to proceed at a slower pace and not be part of the calculation of full proficiency.

The key impediment to achieving the bold objectives of NCLB is the law's reluctance to interfere with traditional state and local powers and prerogatives. The balance between state and nation needs to be altered, but every level of government retains a crucial responsibility in achieving universal proficiency for every young American.

**H/W:** A focus on incremental growth had labeled schools as successful even when very few students could read or do math on grade level. States said everything was fine, while underserved students were missing out on a quality education. So finally, Congress demanded accountability systems that level with the public. To be a good school now, under NCLB, a school has to be good for all groups of students it serves. That's a positive development.

**With NCLB schools are accountable not for *delivering* education to students, the historical norm, but for actually *educating* them—and to high academic standards.**

— Chubb

**Congress demanded that states and school districts assert ownership over their low-performing schools and take responsibility for helping them to improve.**

— Haycock & Wiener

## Q: Is it or isn't it an unfunded mandate?

**JC:** Not at all. Since 2001 federal support for elementary and secondary education has increased nearly two-thirds, the largest increase in history. With NCLB, the federal government has dramatically increased its financial support for public schools while asking those schools to be accountable for what they have always said is their mission—to ensure every child a decent education.

Although it is often asserted that NCLB is underfunded, that's a red herring. The direct costs of implementing NCLB's requirements are more than covered by the substantial funding increases that



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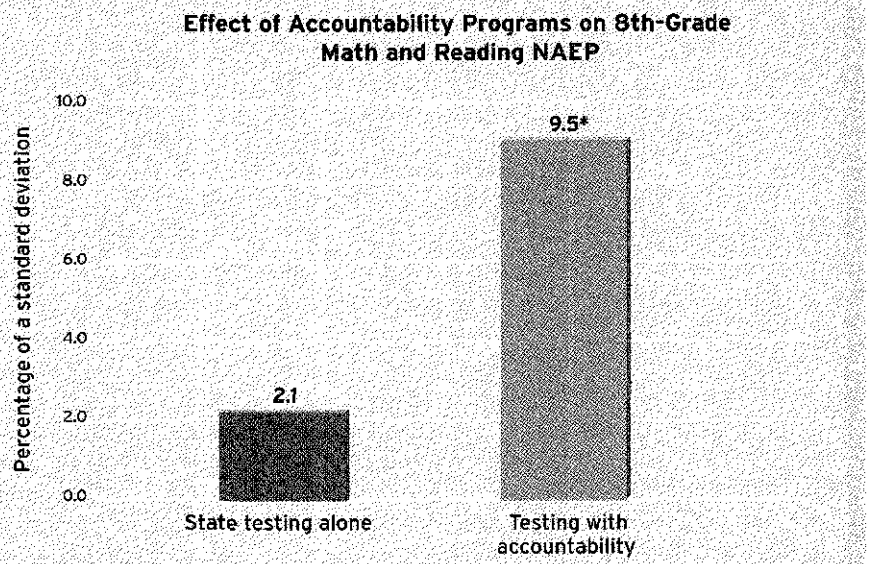
## Accountability Works (Figure 1)

*Compared with students in states without a statewide testing system from 1992 to 2002, students in states with accountability systems improved by nearly 10 percent of a standard deviation between the 4th and 8th grades on the National Assessment of Educational Progress math and reading tests. But in states that required only public reporting of test results—and not a full range of accountability mandates—students did not make significant gains.*




* Statistically significant at the 1 percent level

Note: Gains relative to other states after controlling for changes in the education level of the states' adult population, NAEP exclusion rates, per pupil spending, and racial composition.

SOURCE: Eric Hanushek and Margaret Raymond, "School Accountability and the Black-White Test Score Gap," in Paul E. Peterson, ed., *In One Generation*, forthcoming, 2005

followed its enactment. This plain fact was well documented by a Government Accounting Office study in May 2004. The indirect costs of NCLB are highly debatable, for they are nothing more or less than the costs of public education that states and districts are otherwise expected to provide.

**H/W:** Both politically and substantively, we would be better off if the federal government *increased* NCLB funding (especially if bigger investments were targeted to improving assessments). But this doesn't make NCLB an unfunded mandate. NCLB requires states to set goals, measure progress, publicly report the results, and develop plans for improvement. Whether or not states make any progress meeting the goals, they will continue to receive their federal funding.

Most of the costs that are ascribed to NCLB, such as attracting and retaining more qualified teachers and improving low-performing schools, aren't costs of complying with the law. It's useful to reverse the analysis and ask whether, in the absence of NCLB, states would have less responsibility to educate all students up to state standards. Some will argue that states would have fewer tests or less public reporting, or they would offer less school choice or fewer supplemental services. Yet these are the costs most directly borne by NCLB.

**More than one in every ten schools is facing sanctions for failing to make AYP for at least two years' running.**

— Chubb

## Q: Is the AYP provision too onerous?

**JC:** Only two years into the law's implementation, it is clear that NCLB is breaking education china—if not a new education path. More than one in every ten public schools is facing sanctions for failing to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for at least two years' running. Nearly a third are at risk of sanctions, having failed to make AYP once.

Certainly, the major goal of NCLB is audacious: to have all public school students proficient in reading and math by 2014. But that goal is morally right and—again, contrary to popular argument—attainable. The median state has set proficiency standards about midway between the NAEP's basic and proficient levels, a standard that half of all U.S. students already meet. It is not unreasonable to ask America's schools to help the other half of today's youth to meet these expectations within a decade.

**H/W:** The animating principle behind NCLB's accountability system is that public education can teach, and has a responsibility to teach, almost every student how to read and do math up to a respectable level defined by the state. There is abundant evidence from schools all over the country that this is possible. The AYP system has been tweaked to be more sensitive to some of the challenges facing public schools, for instance, in the way students with disabilities and English-language learners are accounted for and in the method for calculating participation rates.

**RL:** Although the use of state-level NAEP results is not specified in the law, it is reasonable to think of those results as providing some kind of benchmark for state assessments. In 2003 no state or large district had anything close to 100 percent of its students performing at the basic level, much less the proficient level at either grade 4 or grade 8 in either reading or mathematics. (See Figure 2.)



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Furthermore, the law requires an unrealistically rapid rate of improvement. This becomes apparent when the required changes are compared with a variety of different types of evidence, including historical data on change in student performance on state testing programs or on the NAEP. In mathematics, for example, the percentage of students at the proficient level or above on the NAEP would have to have an annual rate of improvement between 2003 and 2014 that is almost four times as fast at grade 4 and over seven times as fast at grade 8 as the rate actually realized between 1996 and 2003. Such rapid acceleration of achievement trends is unrealistic.

In reading, the rate of increase in the percentage of students who are proficient or above is an even more unrealistic jump. At grade 4, 31 percent of the students scored at the proficient level or above on the 2003 reading assessment compared with 29 percent in 1998. At grade 8, the percentage proficient or above on the reading assessments was 32 in both 1998 and 2003. These essentially flat trend lines in the percentage of students who are proficient or above in reading at both grades 4 and 8 would have to suddenly accelerate and maintain that previously unseen rate of improvement for the next decade.

**H/W:** Predictions that many or most schools will fail to meet their AYP goals in the coming years are flawed because they are projections based on past practice, which NCLB emphatically is intended to change. Unfortunately, we have never provided the conditions that would allow us to answer conclusively whether all students can be taught to high standards.

This much we know from current conditions: we cannot educate all students up to high standards by giving the least resources to the most vulnerable students.

**RL:** In 2003, 21.3 percent of Missouri's grade 8 students scored at the proficient level or above on the Missouri mathematics assessment. The corresponding figure on the grade 8 NAEP mathematics assessment was 28 percent. The Missouri three-year trend of percentage proficient or above on its own grade 8 mathematics assessment is relatively flat (21.1 percent in 2002, 21.3 percent in 2003, and 22.9 percent in 2004), yet somehow that percentage is supposed to reach 100 by 2014.

California provides an example of a state where the proficiency standards are somewhat more lenient than the NAEP standards. Thirty-one percent of California's grade 8 students scored at the proficient level or above on the California English-Language Arts Standards Test in 2003, whereas only 22 percent of California's grade 8 students were at the proficient level or above on the 2003 NAEP reading assessment. The percentages of grade 8 students scoring at or above proficient on the California English-language arts test in 2001, 2002, 2003, and 2004 were 32, 32, 31, and 33, respectively. That trend does not augur well for reaching 100 percent by 2014.

**The law requires an unrealistically rapid rate of improvement.**

— Linn

**NCLB has brought increased attention to achievement gaps and ushered in accountability systems that make closing these gaps a top priority.**

— Haycock & Wiener

**No state or large district had anything close to 100 percent of its students performing at basic level, much less proficient.**

— Linn

## Q: Is it a good idea to let states set their own standards? Won't these decline as states strive to ease their failure rates?

**RL:** NCLB requires states to set "challenging student academic achievement standards." The problem is that states set the standards, and they have done so in ways that vary greatly in stringency. Some states have set lenient standards, so that 80 percent or more of their students perform at the proficient level or above, while other states have set such stringent standards that less than a quarter of their students perform at that level.

**JC:** States have used the discretion provided them by NCLB to set achievement proficiency standards that vary widely in difficulty (and worthiness), that in some cases have begun to decline, and, yes, that are likely to foster a "race to the bottom," driving academic standards further downward as 2014 approaches rather than establishing and sustaining the high standards intended by the law.

More disturbing, some states have lowered their definitions of proficiency in response to NCLB. It is very likely, without changes in NCLB, that more states will weaken their standards to meet rising performance expectations.

**H/W:** States that have lowered their standards in response to NCLB constitute a small minority. Most states recognize that if they lower their standards, then they lower their expectations of how much students will learn.

The ramifications of continuing to undereducate our citizenry provide pressure to maintain and even raise our standards. Still, there is a danger that states will lower standards rather than step up to their responsibilities to help more schools and students to meet them. Mandatory participation



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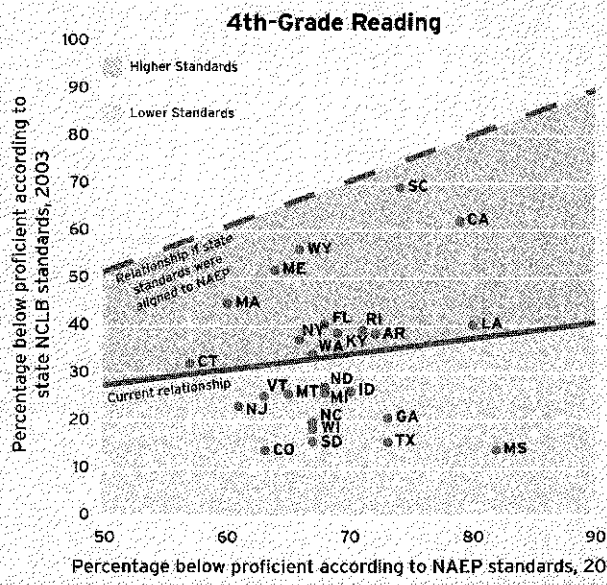
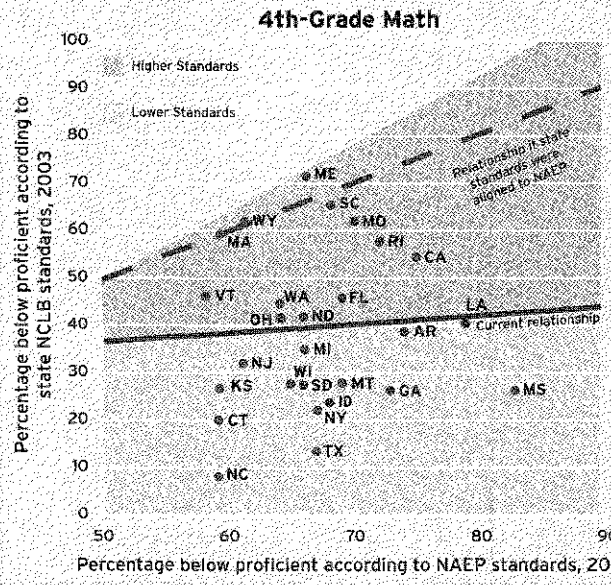
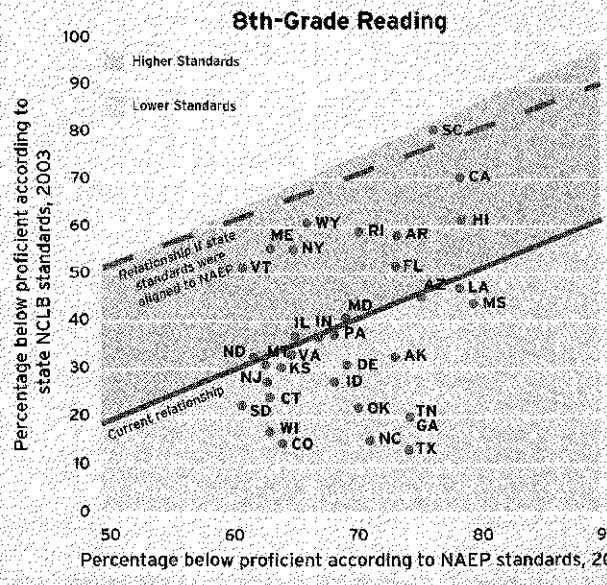
## State Standards Are Anything but Standard (Figure 2)

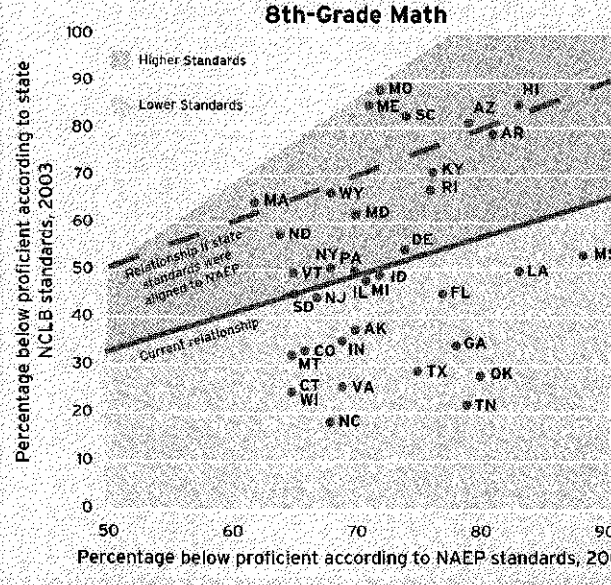
*Many state education officials welcome NCLB's "flexibility" in allowing states to set their own proficiency standards. But when measured on a consistent national scale, the weakness of such flexibility becomes apparent. South Carolina and Maine, for instance, have higher NCLB standards than North Carolina, Texas, Tennessee, and Mississippi. Only a few states have standards that are as high as those established by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the nation's report card.*

On each of the graphs below, the solid line depicts the current relationship across states between the percentage of students not meeting state proficiency standards and the percentage not meeting NAEP standards in 2003. The closer a state is to that line, the more closely its standards match those of a "typical" state. If all states' standards were exactly as high as the NAEP standards, they would arrange themselves along the dashed line. States below the solid line represent states with proficiency standards lower than the typical state, while states above it have higher state standards. Only those few states above the dashed line have standards that exceed the NAEP standards. Each figure includes every state for which both NAEP and state NCLB proficiency percentages were available.




**SOURCE.** School Information Partnership at www.schoolresults.org.



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in NAEP helps some by providing an external benchmark (albeit an imperfect one) for comparing the rigor of state standards. But policymakers at all levels should explore additional ways to ensure that standards for student learning are adequate to meet the needs of society.

**JC:** Some states have used the discretion provided by NCLB to set intermediate proficiency targets (what the law calls Annual Measurable Objectives, or AMOs) that spare most schools from any improvement efforts for several years. This practice only delays the need for major achievement gains by all schools. If this prospective train wreck is allowed to happen, the nation will have little alternative but to ignore NCLB or indefinitely delay its implementation.

**RL:** The differences in stringency have essentially no relationship to differences in the performance of students in the various states on NAEP. (See Figure 2.)

Consider, for example, the grade 8 mathematics results for Colorado and Missouri. NAEP scores show that Colorado students performed slightly better than those in Missouri in 2003 (66 percent below proficiency for Colorado compared with 72 percent for Missouri). On their own assessments, however, the percentage below proficiency in 2003 was 33 percent in Colorado compared with 86 percent in Missouri. The difference between the states' scores clearly has more to do with the higher NCLB standards in Colorado than with a real difference in students' achievement in the two states.

A consequence of this huge variability in stringency of state standards is that, in the context of NCLB, the word proficient has become meaningless.

**JC:** To encourage states to set their academic standards high and avoid a race to the bottom, all state proficiency standards should be calibrated using NAEP as a common yardstick. Specifically, NAEP should be used to rank all state proficiency standards against NAEP's rigorous proficiency standard, and these rankings should be made public.

In addition, states that have set their standards above the median of all states should be given extra time (proportional to the amount by which their standards exceed the median) beyond 2014 to meet those standards for 100 percent of their students. Following this recommendation, states below the median would be encouraged to lift their standards by the public exposure of their low standards and states above the median would be encouraged, by extra time, to keep their standards high.

**During the first full year of NCLB's implementation, the largest school systems in the United States nearly doubled their average rate of improvement in reading and math combined.**

— Chubb

## Q: Were NCLB's architects right to focus on "levels" of achievement rather than on student gains?

**H/W:** If students are far behind grade level, they need an accountability system that asks adults to accelerate those students' learning. Those students need to catch up, not just move a little from where they were before. Replacing AYP with an accountability system based exclusively on growth means that some schools won't ever be expected to teach all of their students the fundamental skills of reading and math.

Moreover, NCLB does credit schools for making real progress. The law's "safe harbor" provision allows schools to make AYP even if they have not met the statewide goals for that year, as long as the school reduces the percent not proficient by 10 percent from the previous year. For example, a school makes AYP if it goes from 60 percent below the proficiency standard to just 54 percent below the standard, a mere 6 percent. Since 6 percent divided by 60 percent is 10 percent, it meets the "safe harbor" requirement, a level of progress that is significant and attainable without being too ambitious. It is also important to recognize that some states, including Massachusetts and New York, use an index system for calculating AYP determinations. In addition to focusing on students at or above proficiency, these index systems give schools credit for bringing students up from below basic to the basic level of achievement.

**RL:** If the percentage of students who are above a "cut score" on a state assessment is to be used, the cut score should be more meaningful than the state-established proficient levels, which lack any semblance of a common meaning across states.

There are several approaches that would be preferable to reporting results in terms of percent proficient or above. One simple approach would be to define the standard, or cut score, on a state assessment as equal to the median score in a base year, presumably 2002. The percentage of students scoring above that constant cut score would then be used to monitor improvement in achievement, with target increases set at reasonable levels, for example, 3 percent a year. With a target increase of



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3 percent a year, the proportion of students scoring above the 2002 median would need to increase from 50 percent in 2002 to 86 percent in 2014. That would represent a gigantic improvement in the achievement of the nation's students, but might not be totally unrealistic. And it surely is not as poorly defined as 100 percent proficient or above, given the huge state-to-state variability in the meaning of proficient.

**JC:** A modest policy adjustment that takes advantage of statistical forecasting techniques could alleviate current concerns. To make statistical forecasts of how schools and their subgroups are progressing, achievement would be projected using each school's current and recent data, estimating the trajectory of progress that schools and subgroups would follow if established trends continue. Schools that fall significantly below the trajectory needed to reach 100 percent by 2014 would not make AYP and would thus become subject to NCLB's accountability provisions. This procedure would remedy the arbitrariness of state AMOs and subgroup sizes, replacing them with consistent measures. It would also give *all* schools an incentive to help all students achieve immediately—and avoid the train wreck of mass failure now down the tracks.

## Q: Is it fair to penalize an entire school when a single group of students underperforms?

**H/W:** Contrary to conventional wisdom and the phrasing of this question, the school improvement process is not designed to penalize schools. Indeed, there is a set-aside of federal funds to which underperforming schools are entitled and an expectation that states and districts will augment these funds with additional resources and technical assistance to help schools improve.

**RL:** A positive feature of NCLB is its emphasis on groups of low-achieving students who have too often been ignored in the past. Disaggregated reporting of results provides a mechanism for monitoring the degree to which improving the achievement of these underserved groups of students is being achieved.

The problem, however, is that while schools can fail to meet AYP in many different ways, they can meet it in only one way. Schools with a sufficient number of students in each of several targeted groups are less likely to meet AYP targets than schools of the same size and similar performance but with a homogeneous student body (such as students who belong to one racial or ethnic group). For example, 3 out of 4 of the 937 California schools reporting results for two subgroups made their AYP target in 2003, compared with only 39 percent of the 291 schools reporting results for six subgroups.

A straightforward fix of the overidentification of schools not meeting AYP would be to change the safe harbor provision. If a subgroup of students in a school falls short of the AYP target, the school can still meet AYP if 1) the percentage of students who score below the proficient level is decreased by 10 percent from the year before, and 2) there is improvement for that subgroup on other indicators.

Changing the safe harbor provision from a 10 percent reduction in below proficient to a 3 percent reduction would go a long way toward solving the problems caused by the multiple hurdles created by subgroup reporting, while ensuring improvement in performance of all subgroups.

**H/W:** If a school has not met its goals with just one group of students, improvement plans can be focused on serving that group in the future. Local educators can distinguish between schools that missed their goals by a little versus schools that are far behind in student achievement.

The real anxiety over these provisions is that they will label good schools as bad. We need an accountability system that identifies every way in which our schools need to improve, but we also need a better way of communicating about it. The American public is capable of handling the truth. We need education leaders who can explain the precise problems facing their schools and how they will fix them.

A consequence of the huge variability in stringency of state standards is that the word proficient has become meaningless.
— Linn

Replacing AYP with an accountability system based on growth means that some schools won't ever be expected to teach all of their students the fundamental skills of reading and math.
— Haycock & Wiener

## Q: Will the "highly qualified teacher" provision do more good or harm?

**JC:** Schools are accountable for ensuring that every student is taught by a teacher who is highly qualified to teach his or her subject area. As basic a requirement as this might seem to be, it has never been demanded in America's schools.

**H/W:** For decades, we have accepted high levels of out-of-field teaching as inevitable and have failed to change policies that systematically assign our weakest teachers to our weakest students. Congress exhibited great leadership by calling on states to improve teacher quality and to address the inequitable distribution of teacher talent. However, states retain



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tremendous discretion in how they determine who is qualified to teach, and many states have papered over their problems rather than acknowledge and confront them.

Unfortunately, the U.S. Department of Education has not focused adequate attention on making sure these provisions were implemented as Congress intended. For example, the Department of Education has never reviewed the plans meant to "ensure that poor and minority children are not taught at higher rates than other children by inexperienced, unqualified, or out of field teachers." And there is little evidence that states are complying with the obligation to address these issues.

**JC:** NCLB's mandate that (by 2005–06) all public school students must be taught by "highly qualified teachers" who are proficient in their subject areas is being satisfied in disingenuous ways that do not in fact ensure that teachers know their content areas. Some states have used their discretion under NCLB to adopt tests for new teachers and alternative requirements for veterans that are far too easy. Unless this portion of NCLB is modified, the law will not significantly improve the quality of teachers.

**H/W:** The irony is that the teacher quality provisions represent the support side of the law. There are no sanctions other than public reporting for failure to meet the goals. Research is clear that raising teacher quality is imperative for raising student achievement, especially in high-poverty and high-minority schools. If the teacher quality provisions can be said to have caused any harm, it is that states have abused their discretion to define away problems rather than addressing them.

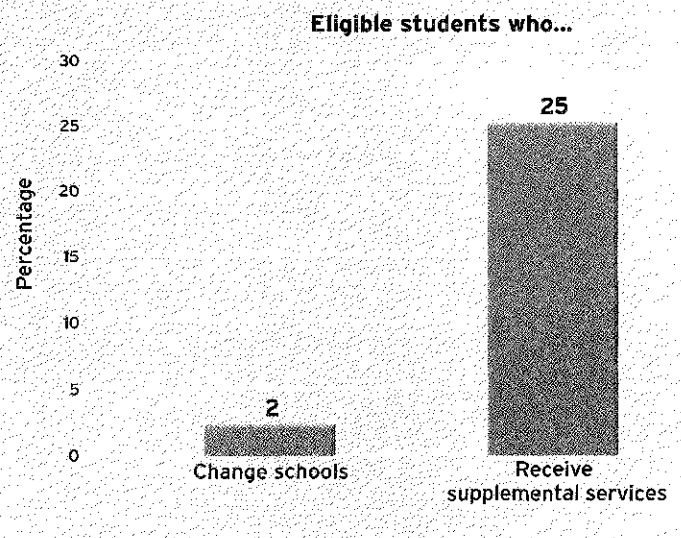
**JC:** The definition of highly qualified teacher should be revised to include any teacher who possesses a bachelor's degree and one of these three additional attributes: 1) a college major in the subject being taught; 2) passage of a subject competency test provided or approved by an independent national agency on teacher certification; or 3) demonstration through a statistically sound value-added methodology that one's teaching has significantly raised pupil scores on state proficiency tests.

There is a dual purpose here: first, to attract more promising candidates to teaching by concentrating on skills directly related to student performance and providing alternatives to time-consuming and often ineffective traditional certification; and, second, to retain effective veteran teachers by focusing directly on their knowledge of subject matter and their teaching effectiveness and to weed out ineffective ones who are holding down positions better given to new, highly qualified teachers.

> NCLB requires that every student is taught by a highly qualified teacher. As basic a requirement as this might seem, it has never been demanded in America's schools.
> — Chubb

## Untapped Resources (Figure 3)

*Some eligible students exercise their NCLB right to use supplemental services after their schools fail to make Adequate Yearly Progress for three consecutive years. But few use NCLB's choice option by switching schools if their school falls short for two years.*




SOURCE: Center on Education Policy, "Year Two of the No Child Left Behind Act," 2004

## Q: What's the role of choice in NCLB?

**JC:** The major new engine in NCLB for raising student achievement is choice: the right of students in faltering schools to choose a new school or private tutoring. These promising strategies for getting students better education are being resisted by the school districts responsible for implementing them. Unless this situation changes, these powerful forces for improvement, equality, and opportunity will fall well short of their potential, leaving NCLB with far fewer chances of succeeding. (See Figure 3.)



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**RL:** In many instances choice is not an option for students attending schools in need of improvement because there are no schools eligible to receive students within the district. While NCLB encourages districts to accept transfer students from other districts, it does not require them to do so. Moreover, even when the option is available, it is seldom used. According to a report of the Harvard Civil Rights project, requests for transfers were made by only 1.9 percent of the 127,451 eligible students in Chicago in 2002–03. The corresponding figure in New York City was 2.3 percent. Just under half of the requests were granted in Chicago, while in New York City slightly fewer than a quarter of the requests were granted.

**H/W:** Choosing a higher-performing school is likely to benefit some students. For example, a *Chicago Sun Times* analysis documented that students who transferred in Chicago accelerated their learning in their new schools, and research from the Citizens' Commission on Civil Rights suggests that the choice provisions are giving students of color opportunities to attend less racially isolated schools.

That said, most families don't want to change schools; they want their neighborhood schools to change. The overwhelming majority of America's young people will continue to be educated—or not—in their local public schools. The school improvement process, which requires a written plan in which the state and school district commit to providing additional support and assistance, has the potential to drive much more significant reform than the choice provisions.

## Q: Do we keep NCLB, change it, or scrap it?

**RL:** NCLB has the potential to make substantial contributions to the achievement of students who have lagged behind and too often been ignored in the past.

Some features of the accountability system, however, need to be modified. The most important modification is to set reasonable performance targets for judging Adequate Yearly Progress. The need for more realistic goals applies to both the safe harbor provision of the law and the annual performance targets.

The current definitions of proficient achievement established by states lack any semblance of a common meaning. Alternatives to defining proficiency should be considered that would provide more meaningful and comparable achievement targets.

Raising teacher quality is imperative for raising student achievement.
— Haycock & Wiener

Choice is not always an option for students attending schools in need of improvement.
— Linn

The law has the potential to improve public education more than any federal education initiative since *Brown vs. Board of Education.*
— Chubb

**JC:** Modifications are indeed warranted, and I have already mentioned several needed changes, such as making proficiency standards consistent, using NAEP as a guide, replacing AMOs, and revising the definition of a highly qualified teacher.

But these changes are not the ones most often bandied about in policy circles or recommended by interest groups on Capitol Hill. We hear talk about relaxing AYP standards or spending more money. Such recommendations undermine the law's basic purpose. They will not save NCLB; they will gut it. This is unfortunate because NCLB deserves saving. The law has the potential to improve public education more than any federal education initiative since *Brown vs. Board of Education* more than 50 years ago. While *Brown* set the historic precedent for *equality* in education, NCLB could set the precedent for *quality*.

**H/W:** Commentators from across the spectrum have remarked on Americans' propensity for championing and then dismissing education reform strategies in very short order. We are in danger of repeating this unfortunate pattern with NCLB. Instead of stretching ourselves to meet the new challenge and carefully reexamining our practices—everything from resource allocation to the preparation and support of classroom teachers—far too many education and policy leaders are deriding the demands of the law as unattainable and calling for immediate relief.

Since NCLB was enacted, we have done more to acknowledge public education's problems than we have done to solve them. Right now, energy should be focused on making NCLB work better. That's the only way we'll know what genuinely merits modification when the law is up for reauthorization in 2006–07.

*John Chubb is chief education officer at Edison Schools, a member of the Koret Task Force on K–12 Education, and co-author of* Politics, Markets, and America's Schools. *Robert Linn is professor of education at the University of Colorado at Boulder and codirector of the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing. Kati Haycock is director of the Education Trust and former executive vice president of the Children's Defense Fund. Ross Wiener is policy director of the Education Trust.*



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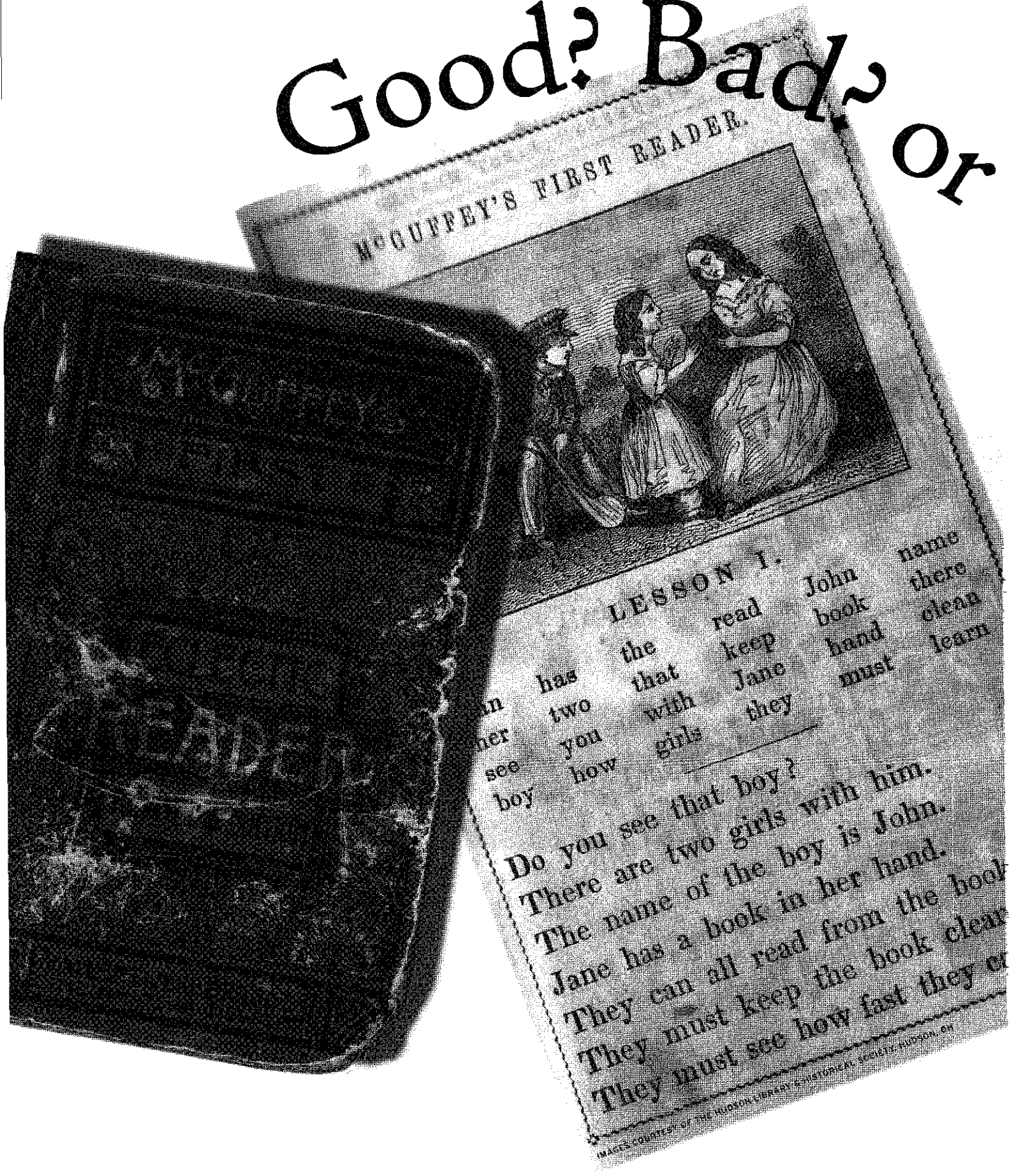
# Good? Bad? or

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# None of the Above?

## The Time-honored, Unavoidable Mandate to Teach Character

BY WILLIAM DAMON

It is an odd mark of our time that the first question people ask about character education is whether public schools should be doing it at all. The question is odd because it invites us to imagine that schooling, which occupies about a third of a child's waking time, somehow could be arranged to play no role in the formation of a child's character.

Try to imagine a school that did manage to stay out of the character education business, refraining from promoting virtues such as honesty and respectfulness. Even if the school survived the chaos that would ensue, could we expect that the character of its students wouldn't be affected (adversely, in this case) by the message that such an abdication of responsibility would impart? For better or worse, every school envelops its students in a moral climate. The choices that the school makes—or fails to make—about what sort of moral climate to create inevitably leave lasting marks on the students who live and learn there. Moral education, in the title phrase of one early book on the matter, "comes with the territory."

Still, questions of whether—not how—today's public schools should attempt to educate for character keep popping up. And in their variety, they tell us something about the roundabout journey

To say little and perform much is the characteristic of a great mind.



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of public schooling in the United States. For the sake of this narrative, we will consider whether that journey helps to accomplish one of schooling's few totally uncontested aims: teaching kids how to read.

## A Perennial Best-Seller

From 1836 to 1922, *McGuffey's Eclectic Readers* were by far the number-one school reading text in most parts of the United States. In their many editions, the readers sold more than 120 million copies. They presented, without hesitation or qualification, the moral and ethical code that their original author, the Reverend William Holmes McGuffey (a Presbyterian minister), believed essential for all children to learn. As exemplified through the dramatic story-problems of these slim volumes, the McGuffey code may be simply stated: A child should be respectful, honest, diligent, kind, fair-minded, temperate in food and drink, and clean.

It may surprise some that the readers still sell about a hundred thousand copies a year, mostly for use in home-school or traditional community settings (such as among the Amish). For the most part, however, the morally centered lessons of McGuffey have been replaced by a different sort of reading text. Some of today's storybooks for students evoke the personal feelings of growing up; some convey the charms of pets; some insightfully delve into problems with friends or family; and some are terrifically funny, with irresistible titles such as *How to Eat Fried Worms* and *Snot Stew*. Yet as well-written, brilliantly illustrated, and personally enlightening as these new books may be, they are not stocked with unambiguous and comprehensive ethical guidance.

This historical change in school reading texts has been neither accidental nor isolated. As a general trend during the 20th century, academic expertise came to prevail over character as public schooling's clear priority. Increasingly, schools became places where children were sent to learn skills first and foremost. The dominant assumption (which had become explicit by the latter part of the 20th century) was that children themselves should figure out—perhaps with some help from family or religious sources, but more likely through their own autonomous rational choices—what to do with the skills they had acquired. Educators wondered—and were pointedly asked—why public schools should presume to muck about with values anyway. And, as public schools increasingly filled with students from diverse backgrounds, determining whose values to teach became more problematic. It all seemed a questionable distraction from the hard and urgent task of skill building.

## Where We Lost Our Way

In any historical narrative, events always trump opinion. Although a reborn character-education movement had sprouted in the early 1970s, it was seen as a throwback to a bygone era and thereby marginalized (one of its own leaders wistfully referred to it as "the great lost tradition"). But by the end of the century, in the wake of ceaseless alarming reports from the disheveled, dispirited, and sometimes violent front lines of our nation's schools, the values-free approach to schooling began to seem less progressive, less inevitable, and less wise. Columbine High School was but one data point, albeit an especially vivid one, on the blood-and-graffiti-splattered high school map of the 1990s. When the mayhem invaded tony suburban communities as well as urban centers, mainstream media took notice. A 1993 front-page *New York Times* story reported: "Gang membership grows in middle-class suburbs," showing up in everything from larceny and vandalism in schools to "razors, bats, and bottles, and now to guns." Other forms of scandalous behavior, nonviolent but still terribly disruptive, paralyzed many schools as well. Cheating in particular became epidemic. Among many well-publicized incidents during the early 1990s, students at Taylor Allderdice High School in a prime Pittsburgh suburb collaborated in a systematic cheating ring, buying and selling homework from one another, stealing tests, and smuggling reference books into exams.

The growing perception of violence-racked and cheating-tainted schools in the early 1990s helped spawn a revived and robust character education movement. Organizations and web sites spread the word, and centers—more than 150 by my count—sprang up to produce and distribute curriculum materials for classroom use. The character education movement, given a boost by widespread, continuous reports of youth misbehavior, became an established part of the education landscape in the space of a few years, a surprisingly rapid

Innocence is better than repentance. • With all thy soul love God above; and as thyself



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## Words to Live by, for Centuries, across Nations and Religions: This Rule Is Golden

### Bahá'í World Faith
And if thine eyes be turned towards justice, choose thou for thy neighbour that which thou choosest for thyself.
—*Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*

### Brahmanism:
This is the sum of duty: Do naught unto others which would cause you pain if done to you.
—*Mahabharata 5:1517*

### Buddhism
Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.
—*Udana-Varga 5:18*

### Christianity
Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.
—*Matthew 7:12, King James Version*

And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise.
—*Luke 6:31, King James Version*

### Confucianism
Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you
—*Analects 15:23*

Tse-kung asked, "Is there one word that can serve as a principle of conduct for life?" Confucius replied, "It is the word 'shu'—reciprocity. Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire."
—*Doctrine of the Mean 13.3*

Try your best to treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself, and you will find that this is the shortest way to benevolence.
—*Mencius VII.A.4*

### Hinduism
One should not behave towards others in a way which is disagreeable to oneself.
— *Mahabharata, Anusasana Parva 113.8*

This is the sum of the Dharma [duty]: do naught unto others which would cause you pain if done to you.
—*Mahabharata 5:1517*

### Islam
None of you [truly] believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself."
—*Number 13 of Imam "Al-Nawawi's Forty Hadiths."*

### Jainism
In happiness and suffering, in joy and grief, we should regard all creatures as we regard our own self.
—*Lord Mahavira, 24th Tirthankara*

A man should wander about treating all creatures as he himself would be treated.
—*Sutrakritanga 1.11.33*

### Judaism
Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.
—*Leviticus 19:18*

What is hateful to you, do not to your fellow man. This is the law: all the rest is commentary.
—*Talmud, Shabbat 31a*

### Sufism
The basis of Sufism is consideration of the hearts and feelings of others. If you haven't the will to gladden someone's heart, then at least beware lest you hurt someone's heart, for on our path, no sin exists but this.
—*Dr. Javad Nurbakhsh, master of the Nimatullahi Sufi Order*

### Zoroastrianism
That nature alone is good which refrains from doing unto another whatsoever is not good for itself.
—*Dadistan-i-dinik 94:5*

Whatever is disagreeable to yourself do not do unto others.
—*Shayast-na-Shayast 13:29*

—compiled by Mark Linnen

the neighbor love. • The Truth itself is not believed, from one who often has deceived.



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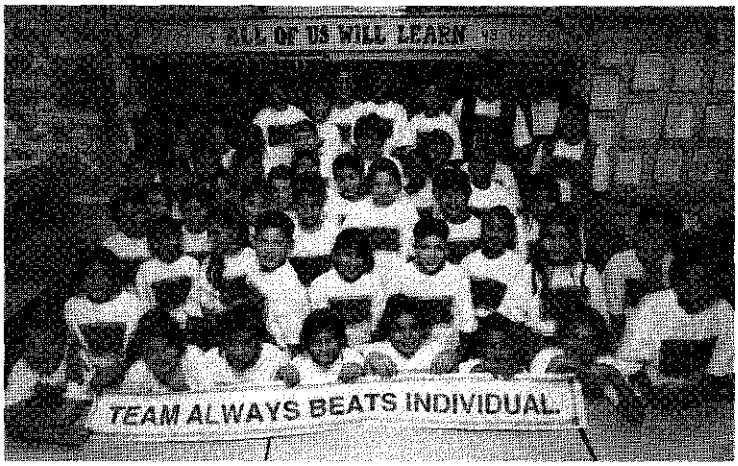
development in a field that normally adopts changes slowly. It may be that the movement already has had some effect, for as Joel Best pointed out ("Monster Hype," *Education Next*, Summer 2002), evidence shows that school violence has begun to decline in recent years.



*At Kipp Academy Charter Schools, maxims pervade everyday classroom life.*

I witnessed one facet of the resurgence of the character education movement in the federal government's adoption of it during the Clinton administration. At a 1993 White House conference that I attended, Secretary of Education Richard Riley expressed approval of the movement's aims, but cautioned that such moral uplift was a matter for family and church, not the federal government. By 1996, however, in his State of the Union address, President Clinton proclaimed, "I challenge all our schools to teach character education." That year the Department of Education established the "Partnerships in Character Education" program to support the president's challenge. The Bush administration has continued and expanded the size of the program several fold.

## The Inner-Directed Society

Yet the original question—whether, not how, to educate for character—remains essentially unanswered, a condition that creates doubt and debate among educators and the public. Far from worrying about how to preserve children's autonomy, however, skeptics now complain that character education is not forceful enough in presenting children with the stark and incontestable contrast between right and wrong. In a recent book, with the perhaps understandably overwrought title *The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age without Good or Evil*, James Davison Hunter criticizes character education for its failure to promote morality with sufficient strength and clarity. The problem, according to Hunter, a professor of sociology and religion at the University of Virginia, lies in the psychologically oriented pedagogy that character educators turn to in teaching values to children: "Dominated as it is by perspectives diffused and diluted from professional psychology, this regime is overwhelmingly therapeutic and self-referencing; in character, its defining feature is a moral framework whose center point is the autonomous self." By focusing on the child's everyday behavior and feelings, moral values get watered down and lost.

Indeed, a recent research review by Marvin Berkowitz and Melinda Bier of the University of Missouri (at St. Louis) found that the most common topic in today's character education programs is "social-emotional content"—in particular, what they call "personal improvement/self-management and awareness (self-control, goal setting, relaxation techniques, self-awareness, emotional awareness)." Exactly what part of a child's moral development might be stimulated by relaxation or emotional awareness training is a mystery that neither science nor philosophy has shed much light on. My guess is that such feeling states have little to do with the acquisition of childhood morality and that, as Hunter complains, a pedagogy built primarily around the self's sentiments may distract children from the real challenges of forging character.

## The Right, the Wrong, and the Strictly Instrumental

The contemporary character-education movement has thus been misled by the trendy notion that children's positive feelings are the key to all sorts of learning, moral as well as academic. Many educators now engage in silly activities and exercises focused on an obsessive attention to children's self-esteem, a focus that has foisted warehouses' worth of nonsense on students. (One assignment given my youngest daughter in her elementary school days was to write, "I'm terrific," 20 times on a 3x5 card—which she dutifully did, all the while wondering aloud what in fact she was terrific at.) When the drive to boost children's self-esteem interferes with moral instruction, it goes beyond silly to harmful.

Once when I was a guest on a National Public Radio show, a parent of a 5th-grade student called in to discuss an incident

He who would thrive, must rise at five. He who has thriven, may lie till seven. • You are not simply



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that was highly upsetting to her but all too familiar to me. That week her son had been sent home with a note informing her that he had been caught taking money out of fellow students' backpacks. The mother quickly got on the phone to the boy's teacher to tell her she was appalled, that she couldn't bear the thought of her son stealing from his friends. "What can we do about this?" asked the mother. To her astonishment, the teacher responded by asking her to say and do nothing. "We were obliged to inform you of what happened," the teacher said, "but now we wish to handle this in our own professional way. And to start with, we are not calling this incident 'stealing.' That would just give your child a bad self-image. We've decided to call what your son did 'uncooperative behavior'—and we'll point out to him in no uncertain terms that he won't be very popular with his friends if he keeps acting this way!" The parent reported that the boy now ignored her efforts to counsel him about the matter. She worried that he had "blown the whole thing off" without learning anything from it at all.

In its "professional" judgments, the school had translated a wrongful act (stealing) into a strictly instrumental concern (losing popularity). The school did so in order to save the child from feelings (shame, guilt) that it assumed could cause the child discomfort and thereby damage the child's self-image. The school was right on the first count and mistaken on the second. The child probably would have felt embarrassed if forcefully told that he had committed a moral offense—and such an experience in firsthand shame and guilt is precisely what researchers have found to be a primary means of moral learning. There is no credible scientific evidence that supports the idea that a child's self-image can be harmed by reprimands for wrongdoing, as long as the feedback pertains to the behavior rather than to the child's own intrinsic self-worth.

## Confusing Ourselves and Our Students

Over the years I have often been asked to help resolve trouble in schools torn apart by cheating scandals. In each case, the resistance of teachers to discussing the moral meaning of the incident with students was palpable. I explain to them that the moral issues are many, but by no means hard to understand. Cheating is wrong for at least four reasons: it gives students who cheat an unfair advantage over those who do not cheat; it is dishonest; it is a violation of trust; and it undermines the academic integrity, the code of conduct, and the social order of the school.

I am still shocked at the number of teachers who say, in front of their students, that it is hard to hold students to a no-cheating standard in a society where people cheat on taxes, on their spouses, and so on. Some teachers sympathize with student cheaters because they think that the tests students take are flawed or unfair. Some pardon students because they believe that sharing schoolwork is motivated by loyalty to friends. In my experience, it can take days of intense discussion, and some arm twisting, to get a school community to develop a no-cheating standard that is solidly supported by expressions of moral concern.

In our time, a hesitancy to use a moral language remains the most stubborn and distracting problem for character education. Teachers worry that words that shame children may wound their self-esteem; that there are no words of moral truth anyway; that it is hypocritical to preach moral codes to the young when so many adults ignore them; or that in a diverse society one person's moral truth is another's moral falsehood. Yet adult expressions of clear moral standards are precisely what guide character formation in the young.

The conviction that moral standards are not arbitrary, that they reflect basic human truths and therefore that they must be passed from generation to generation is a necessary prerequisite of all moral education. This was a point that sociologist Emile Durkheim made in his great 1902–03 lectures, "Moral Education," the foundation for most modern approaches to the subject. Even those who started their moral education work from a different direction, such as Harvard psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg, came around to this view once they tried their hand at the actual practice of teaching children good values.

## Back to the Future

The contours of what we must do are clear: Public schools must accept the mandate of educating for character. Since they shape student character no matter what they do, schools may as well try to do a good job at it. Schools must present students

*to be kind and helpful to others; but, whatever you do, give honest, earnest purpose to it.* ♦



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with objective standards expressed in a moral language that sharply distinguishes right from wrong and directs students to behave accordingly. Sentiments such as "feeling better" cannot stand as sufficient reason for moral choice. A school must help students understand that they are expected to be honest, fair, compassionate, and respectful whether it makes them feel good or not. The character mandate that adults must pass on to children transcends time, place, or personal feelings.

The cauldron of day-to-day practice, of course, always contains a steamy mixture of disparate elements. What schools actually do with character education cannot be summed up in one easy generalization. At the classroom level, education is a pragmatic, seat-of-the-pants enterprise in which teachers tend to throw whatever they have at students, and character educators are no exception.

For clues about what we can do, let us return for a moment to the James Hunter critique quoted earlier. The complaint was that character education "in a time without good or evil" provides children with the following moral logic: To the question "Why should one not be bad, say, through stealing or cheating?" follows the reply, "How would it make you feel if someone did that to you?" As I suggested earlier, Hunter is correct that the moral logic here is not sufficient, because stealing or cheating is wrong no matter how anyone feels about it. But Hunter's complaint is too sweeping and in its overreach misses a valuable opportunity to educate children about the foundations of moral behavior and belief.

## The Heavy Metal of Character

Suppose that the teacher took the response, "How would it make you feel if someone did that to you?" an extra step—backward through the ages of moral tradition—linking what Hunter takes to be a mere touchy-feely sentiment to one of the great moral maxims of all time: the Golden Rule. The version most familiar in Western society—"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you"—is in fact a general precept shared by most of the world's religions (See box, p. 23). While asking the child to take the perspective of another who would be hurt by a harmful act, a teacher could draw the student's attention to the great moral traditions that have proclaimed the importance of doing so, connecting the student's personal sentiments with the earlier wisdom of civilizations. The teacher could introduce students to the glorious panoply of worldwide philosophical thought that has celebrated this principle. A lively classroom discussion could ensue from exploring why so much profound thinking across so many diverse times and places has focused on this classic maxim.

Pointing out the rich religious and historical traditions behind a maxim underlines its deep importance in human life. It informs students of the universal and timeless truths underlying moral strictures. It does not imply proselytizing for a particular religious doctrine, because the universality of core moral principles can be easily demonstrated. This kind of instruction is needed pedagogically not only because it elicits historical interest, but also because it adds a dimension of moral gravity and objectivity to what otherwise would stand only as a simple statement of a child's personal feelings.

If a child's moral education is limited to stimulating self-reflection about his personal feelings, not much has been accomplished. But if the child's moral education begins with a consideration of moral feelings such as empathy and then links these feelings with the enduring elements of morality, the child's character growth will be enhanced by transforming the child's emotions—which do play a key role in behavior—into a lasting set of virtues.

An essential part of moral education is reaffirming the emotional sense of moral regret that young people naturally feel when they harm another person or violate a fundamental societal standard. Every child is born with a capacity to feel empathy for a person who is harmed, with a capacity to feel outrage when a social standard is violated, and with a capacity to feel shame or guilt for doing something wrong. This is a natural, emotional basis for character development, but it quickly atrophies without the right kinds of feedback—in particular, guidance that supports the moral sense and shows how it can be applied to the range of social concerns that one encounters in human affairs. A primary way that schools can provide students with this kind of guidance is to teach them the great traditions that have endowed us with our moral standards.

The Golden Rule is a prototypical moral maxim with both a long historical legacy and widely recognized contemporary

God gives a great deal of money to some persons, in order that they may assist those who



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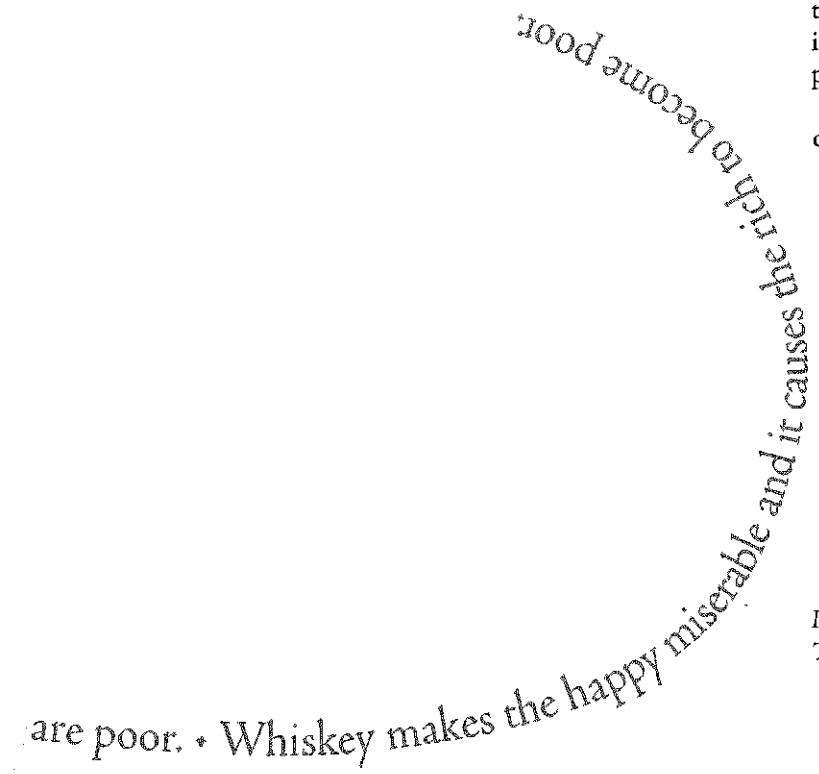
usefulness. (It is explicitly taught and practiced in the field of business management, a fact that many high school students would very likely be interested to learn.) There are legions of maxims in the living lore of our common culture, and many, like the Golden Rule, bear a moral message: "Two wrongs don't make a right" (ancient Scots); "You are only as good as your word" (early American); "Honesty is the best policy" (Cervantes, Ben Franklin); "It's better to light a single candle than to curse the darkness" (old Chinese proverb). As education policymaker Arthur Schwartz has written, each of these "wise sayings" encapsulates a store of wisdom that has been handed down to us through countless conversations across the generations.

What these ancient maxims suggest is that societies distant from us in time and place have something important to tell us regarding our efforts to educate young people for character. Among other things, they remind us that neither we nor our children need to invent civilization from scratch. Our journeys in moral learning begin with the aid of our rich cultural traditions and the living wisdom found therein. We are inheritors of a wealth of moral knowledge, a set of universal truths drawn from the forge of human experience over the centuries. In our transient lifestyles and throw-away relationships, in our modernist commitment to the autonomous self, we sometimes forget this. But in our role as guardians of the young, we must share the obligation to pass on to our children that which civilization has given us.




All this, of course, flies in the face of "constructivist" approaches to education favored in recent decades. Supposedly, children learn nothing useful through memorization; and, we have been warned, rote learning leads only to boredom and rejection, going "in one ear and out the other." But as I have written elsewhere, such fears are simplistic as well as unsupported by evidence. The contrast between the "discovery learning" of constructivism and the practice-and-drill of traditional learning is a false opposition. Children benefit from both, they require both, and the two complement rather than fight each other in the actual dynamics of mastering knowledge. The usefulness of memorized bits of wisdom that are stored away and used at later times, when they are better understood in the light of lived experience, has been fully supported by developmental theories ranging from the social-cultural to the biological.

One of the other principles of psychological development is that children learn best when they confront clear and consistent messages in numerous ways and in multiple contexts. In the character arena, young people need to hear moral messages from all the respected people in their lives if they are to take the messages to heart. A student learns honesty in a deep and lasting way when a teacher explains why cheating undermines the academic mission, when a parent demonstrates the importance of telling the truth for family solidarity, when a sports coach discourages deceit because it defeats the purpose of fair competition, and when a friend shows why lies destroy the trust necessary for a close relationship. The student then acquires a sense of why honesty is important to all the human relationships that the student will participate in, now and in the future.

And the past plays a part in moral learning. We do not invent our ethical codes from scratch, nor should we expect that our children could. Our inherited moral traditions are the essential elements of civilized society. When presented to students through a lively pedagogy of received wisdom, such as may be found in common maxims and precepts, these moral traditions can provide a compelling historical dimension to character education. For too long our public schools have hidden away the historical dimension, keeping the traditional foundations of moral instruction out of sight. It is time to remove this unnecessary handicap and build the moral futures of our children on the best wisdom that the past and present can offer.

*William Damon is professor of education, director of the Center on Adolescence at Stanford University, and senior fellow at the Hoover Institution.*
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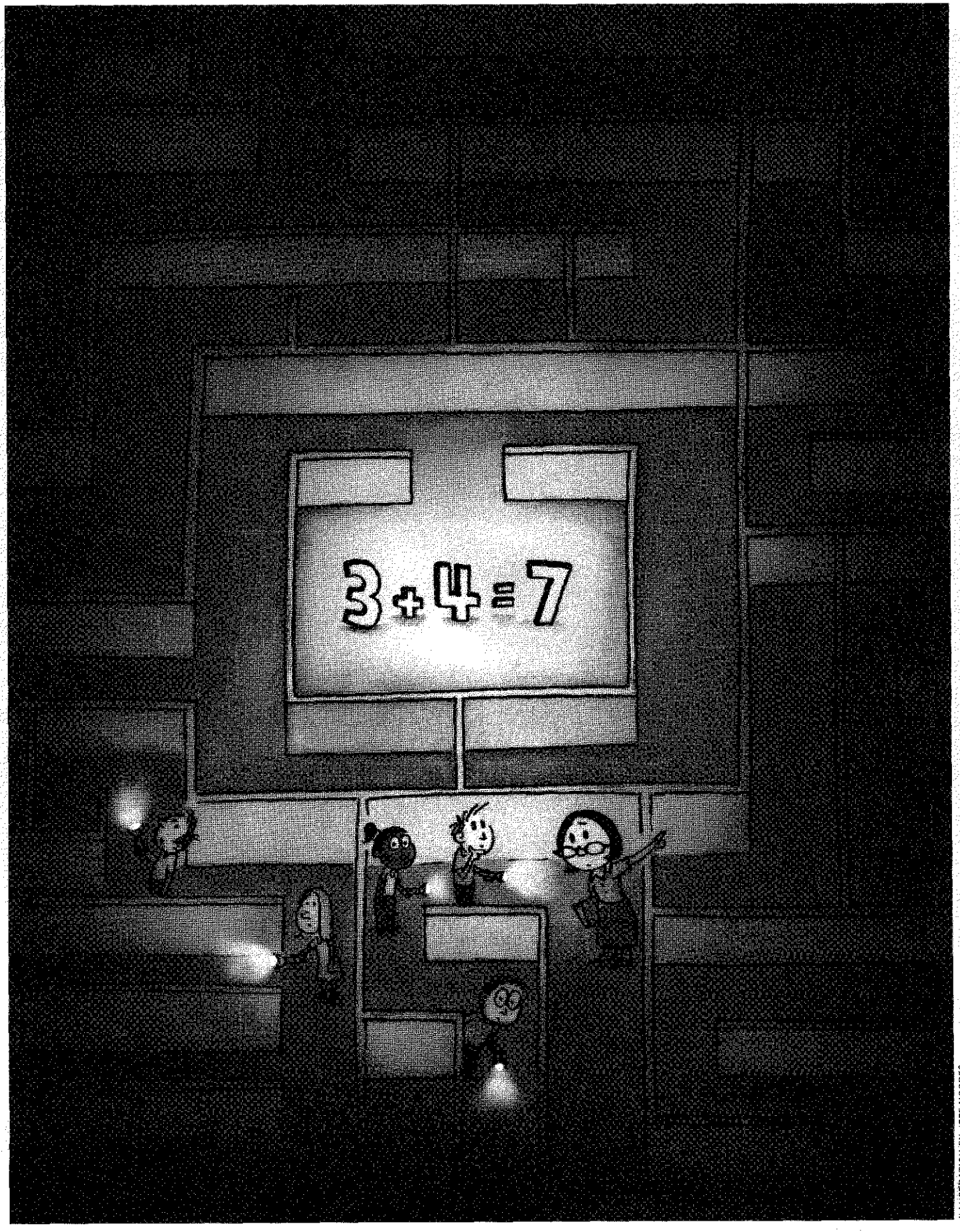


ILLUSTRATION BY JEFF MOORES

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# The New, A-Maze-ing Approach to MATH

## A Mathematician with a Child Learns Some Politics

I am not a mathematics teacher, but I have a degree in mathematics and an intense interest in how the subject is taught. When I retire, I would like to teach math, which is why I started tutoring high school students in my spare time three years ago. My first student was a 9th grader having difficulty with geometry. He stated his problem succinctly: "I don't know how to do proofs." Confronted with what I thought could be a common problem, I was still unaware that what I was really seeing was a national crisis in mathematics education.

Here's some of what I would soon learn:

—Only 55 percent of 8th graders taking the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) exam in math correctly answered the question, "How many pieces of string will you have if you divide ¾ yard of string into pieces each ⅛ yard long?"

—In an international math test taken by students worldwide in 1995 (the Third International Mathematics and Science Study, or TIMSS), U.S. student math proficiency for 8th graders fell below the international average (28th out of 41 countries). For 12th grade, U.S. math performance was among the lowest (18th of the 21 countries participating).

—In 1989 the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) published its *Curriculum and Evaluation Standards for School Mathematics*—an extensive set of mathematics standards for grades K–12 which de-emphasized memorization of number facts, the learning of proofs, and algebraic skills, but encouraged the use of calculators and "discovery learning."

BY BARRY GARELICK



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—The National Science Foundation (NSF) promoted the NCTM standards beginning in 1991 and awarded millions of dollars in grant money for the writing of math texts that embraced them and to state boards of education whose math standards aligned with them (see Figure 1).

Not knowing about these significant events (all of them before last December's release of the Program for International Student Assessment report ranking American 15-year-olds 24th out of 29 in math among industrial countries (see Figure 2)), I had no idea that our children were being deprived of a math education, thanks in no small part to a dubious education theory, watered-down standards, and a well-meaning but intellectually bankrupt federally subsidized program of math illiteracy.

What I did know was that my 9th grader didn't know how to do proofs.

I looked through his textbook, one of whose authors was a recent president of NCTM, and I was surprised to find very few proofs of anything. More troubling, most theorems in the book were stated as postulates—that is, propositions stated without proof—and students were told to memorize them. The problems at the end of the chapter required students to do only a few simple proofs.

Proofs in geometry class have been a mainstay of mathematics. In fact, proofs were always considered an essential part of high school geometry, not only because of their importance in higher math, but because learning the rules of logical argument and reasoning has applications in science, law, political science, and writing. To see proofs being shortchanged in a geometry textbook was shocking.

Algebra texts were in no better condition, in terms of presentation and content—or, rather, their lack of content. Even if you accept the argument that geometry in general, and proofs in particular, are unnecessary for students to learn, at least algebra should be taught properly, since algebra is the common language of, and gateway to, all of higher math. The absence of clear explanation and logical development left students I later tutored in algebra as lost as my geometry student. Their textbooks (and, probably, their teachers too) encouraged them to use a graphing calculator. Operations with algebraic fractions, like $\frac{x}{6} + \frac{x}{4}$, were given little attention, to say nothing of quadratic equations, once the pinnacle of any first-year algebra course. Instead, the quadratic formula is presented for the students to memorize and apply—if it is even mentioned at all.

At the time I started tutoring, my daughter was in 2nd grade. I was concerned that she was not learning her addition and subtraction facts. Other parents we knew were saying the same thing. Teachers told them not to worry because kids eventually "get it."

One teacher told me her understanding of the new method. "It used to be that if you missed a concept or method in math, then you were lost for the rest of the year. But the way we do it now, kids have a lot of ways to do things, like adding and subtracting, so that math topics from day to day aren't dependent on kids' mastering a previous lesson."

In a world where it doesn't matter when you learn something, because you'll get it eventually, there seem to be few if any critical junctures, no mastery of procedure, no building on what you've learned—no learning.

**The education theory at the heart of the dispute can be traced to John Dewey, an early proponent of learning through discovery.**

## The Hell-Hath-No-Fury Postulate

Coincidentally, I had the opportunity to find out how my experiences related to the politics of math education. I work for the federal government, which has a program that gives employees a chance to work on Capitol Hill to gain experience and knowledge of legislative and congressional procedures, which is valuable information when working in government. I applied for and received a six-month detail to work in a Democratic senator's office. Senator X (so called, in keeping with mathematical convention to describe a class of variables, because, as I was also to learn, both the good intentions and the shortcomings of Congress are institutional) was interested in establishing a science project to nurture a "homegrown" breed of scientists and engineers who would then support that state's burgeoning technology industry. Since I thought a likely place to start would be math education, the staffers working the education issue asked me to see what I could come up with.

I compiled a list of questions that I sent by e-mail to various mathematicians involved with the math education issue.



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The questions focused on the quality of textbooks and teaching, with emphasis on algebra and geometry. I also wanted to know whether K–6 texts taught arithmetic well enough to prepare students to learn algebra.

The nice thing about working on the Hill is that you almost always get responses to e-mails and phone calls. Fifteen minutes after I sent an e-mail to Harvard mathematics professor Wilfried Schmid, he called. I found out that his initiation into the world of K–12 math education was similar to mine—through his daughter. He explained how she was not being taught her multiplication tables. He was shocked at the math instruction she was receiving in the 3rd grade. Its substance was shallow, memorization was discouraged, students were kept dependent on mental crutches (her teacher made her work with blocks or count on her fingers), and the intellectual level was well below the capability of most of the kids in his daughter's class.

Schmid's reaction to the problems of math texts and teaching was similar to that of other mathematicians I talked to in the course of my Capitol Hill assignment, particularly those with children. Those dialogues led me to develop an ad hoc theory that I will postulate (this means I don't have to prove it): Hell hath no fury like a mathematician whose child has been scorned by an education system that refuses to know better. In Schmid's case, he talked to parents, school boards, and ultimately with the Massachusetts commissioner of education. Along with others, he succeeded in revamping Massachusetts's math standards, much to the dislike of the education establishment and textbook publishers.

## Textbook Taxes (Figure 1)

*Since 1990, the National Science Foundation has awarded more than $83 million to programs that developed textbooks promoting approaches that are favored by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics.*

| Organization | Program name | Grant amount (in millions of dollars) |
|---|---|---|
| University of Illinois at Chicago | Math Trailblazer | 6.4 |
| TERC, Inc. | Investigations in Number, Data and Space | 11.4 |
| University of Chicago | Everyday Mathematics | 5.4 |
| Education Development Center | MathScape | 4.3 |
| Michigan State University | Connected Mathematics Project | 4.9 |
| University of Wisconsin at Madison | Mathematics in Context | 6.2 |
| University of Montana | MATH Thematics | 5.7 |
| Institute for Research on Learning | Middle School Mathematics through Application Project | 2.8 |
| Connecticut Business and Industry Association Education Foundation | Math Connections (Secondary Mathematics Core Curriculum Initiative) | 4.1 |
| Western Michigan University | Contemporary Mathematics in Context (Core Plus) | 13.9 |
| San Francisco State University | Interactive Mathematics Program | 11.6 |
| Consortium for Mathematics and Its Applications, Inc. | Mathematics: Modeling Our World (ARISE) | 6.1 |
| Montana Council of Teachers of Mathematics | Systemic Initiative for Montana Mathematics and Science | 1.0 |

SOURCE: National Science Foundation

## Framing the Debate

The controversy over K–12 math education has come to be known as the "math wars." Like Schmid, mathematicians have been active in this debate, as has the "mathematics community" at large, including not only mathematicians at the university level, but teachers and others involved in the education establishment. They believe that students must master basic skills (the number facts, standard algorithms for adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing) in tandem with larger concepts about mathematics.

On the other side of the debate are the followers of an education theory that promotes discovery learning, minimization of both teacher instruction and repetitive drills, and a disdain for standard procedures (algorithms). The math being protested—by the mathematics community—is called a variety of things: "reform math," "standards-based math," "new new math," and, most commonly, "fuzzy math."

Although the education theories on which much of fuzzy math is based are promoted in many education schools in the United States, it is not accurate to say that everyone in the education arena buys into these ideas. Therefore, for purposes of clarity, and to be consistent with a vocabulary used by others describing the math wars, I will use the term "educationist" to refer to those who promote the contested theory of math education known generally as discovery learning.



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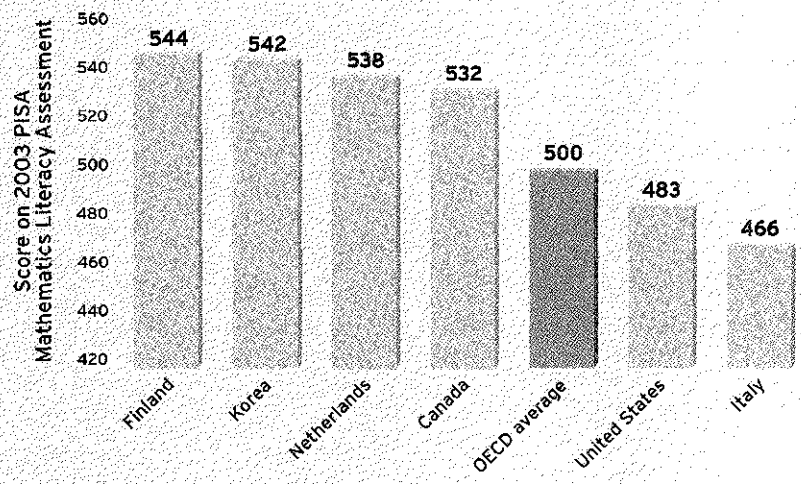
## The Perils of Fuzzy Math (Figure 2)

*In math, 15-year-olds in the United States finished 24th out of 29 among Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries in the triennial Program for International Student Assessment (PISA).*




SOURCE: OECD, PISA 2003, 2004

## Early Skirmishes

The math wars revolve around a four-part problem: A disputed theory of education that informs NCTM's standards; state boards of education that base their standards of learning for mathematics on the NCTM standards; textbooks written to incorporate these standards; and teachers and others in the education establishment who are indoctrinated in the disputed education theory and who may not possess enough knowledge of mathematics to overcome the first three factors.

The education theory at the heart of the dispute can be traced to John Dewey, an early proponent of learning through discovery. But for all practical purposes, the story begins on October 4, 1957, when the Soviet Union launched Sputnik. This event signaled the American malaise in science and mathematics education and the need to overcome it if we weren't to fall further behind the Soviet Union and lose the cold war. Thus the U.S. Congress was motivated to pass appropriations that triggered the development of the "new math," a national effort, spurred by the National Science Foundation, that eventually found its way into most of our schools.

The curriculum, designed primarily by mathematicians, had problems, but it introduced to algebra, geometry, and trigonometry a long-missing formalism, logic, and consistency, and it resulted in calculus being taught in high school. The problem, however, was that a similar formalism was introduced into K–6 texts and curricula, with the result that students (and elementary school teachers, who were caught totally off guard) were exposed to number bases, set theory, and axioms long before they were ready for them. And soon enough the new math was being blamed for not teaching basic arithmetic: it was often said that new-math students could tell you that 5 + 3 = 3 + 5, but didn't know that it was equal to 8.

Mathematicians have agreed for years that emphasizing sets and number bases in math programs designed for the lower grades was a horrendous mistake. Notwithstanding these errors, however, the difference between the current slew of textbooks and those from the new-math days of the 1960s is definitely worth noting: Accomplished mathematicians wrote many of the texts used in that earlier era , and the math—though misguided and inappropriate for the lower grades and too formal for the high school grades—was at least mathematically correct. Some of the high school texts were absolutely first-rate, and new-math–era textbooks like Mary Dolciani's "Structure and Method" series for algebra and geometry continue to be used by math teachers who understand mathematics and how it is to be taught. (They usually use them on the sly, since most teachers are required to use the books that the schools have adopted.)

During the new-math era, which spanned the period between Sputnik to the early 1970s, mathematicians dominated the design of math texts and curricula for the first, and almost last, time. Up to that point mathematicians had been kept out of the math education picture, and K–12 mathematics tended not to include any examination of the logical structure of mathematics itself, with the single exception of Euclidean geometry. Students in the first half of the 20th century had instruction in practical matters: consumer buying, insurance, taxation—everything but algebra, geometry, or trigonometry, which, when they were taught, were frequently lacking in depth.

Significantly, the new-math era was one of the only times that mathematicians were given an opportunity to make proper math education available to the masses. (Not until the past few years, working with several state education departments, would they be allowed back into math education decisions.) And some believe that had certain prominent mathematicians who had started working with the development of the new-math programs managed to maintain their influence on those programs, the math education that would have emerged from new math—both lower grades and high school—would have been on par with the best of the math programs overseas.

Eventually, however, the problems with K–6 formalism and the logic and formalism of the program in general doomed new math. The general public, the education community, and even mathematicians themselves judged the new-math programs a failure. Mathematicians were assigned the blame, and the education establishment took back the reins. That establishment



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received an inadvertent boost in 1983 with the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, the shockingly pessimistic assessment of the nation's schools by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. The report sounded another alarm about student math performance, and the NCTM, increasingly dominated by educationists, took advantage of this new education crisis to write revised math standards. *The Curriculum and Evaluation Standards for School Mathematics*, published in 1989, purported to put the country back on the math track. But because it was, in part, a reaction to the new math and those believed responsible for it, NCTM did not, as mathematicians point out, promote a lively public debate, as had the creators of the new math, but suppressed it.

## Some Secrets about Discovery Learning

The NCTM standards were a brew of progressivism—a nod to the 1920s when math was supposed to be practical—and constructivism, which was progressivism that adapted research from cognitive psychology to the task of teaching and called it discovery learning. The standards were based on theories of learning that assumed that children had an innate ability to understand math. The group's math curricula were thus structured to allow children to *discover* math concepts rather than to be *given* them, through direct instruction. The standards also expanded their reach to include, in addition to basic arithmetic, algebra, geometry, and trigonometry.

The NCTM's view was that traditional teaching techniques, known as "drill and kill," numbed student minds, turned them off math, and taught them nothing. And so the new standards recommended that students learn "strategies" for learning number facts rather than memorize those facts. It emphasized the use of calculators in all grades. Most important, however, the standards recommended certain areas that should receive "decreased attention" in grades K–4, including "complex paper-and-pencil computations," "long division," "paper-and-pencil fraction computation," "use of rounding to estimate," "rote practice," "rote memorization of rules," and "teaching by telling." This last item, teaching by telling, is a reference to direct instruction (telling students what they need to know), which NCTM believed should be replaced by "discovery."

Discovery learning has always been a powerful teaching tool. But constructivists take it a step beyond mere tool, believing that only knowledge that one discovers for oneself is truly learned. There is little argument that learning is ultimately a discovery. Traditionalists also believe that information transfer via direct instruction is necessary, so constructivism taken to extremes can result in students' not knowing what they have discovered, not knowing how to apply it, or, in the worst case, discovering—and taking ownership of—the wrong answer. Additionally, by working in groups and talking with other students (which is promoted by the educationists), one student may indeed discover something, while the others come along for the ride.

Texts that are based on NCTM's standards focus on concepts and problem solving, but provide a minimum of exercises to build the skills necessary to understand concepts or solve the problems. Thus students are presented with real-life problems in the belief that they will learn what is needed to solve them. While adherents believe that such an approach teaches "mathematical thinking" rather than dull routine skills, some mathematicians have likened it to teaching someone to play water polo without first teaching him to swim.

The *Standards* were revised in 2000, due in large part to the complaints and criticisms expressed about them. Mathematicians felt that the revised standards, called *The Principles and Standards for School Mathematics* (*PSSM 2000*), were an improvement over the 1989 version, but they had reservations. The revised standards still emphasize learning strategies over mathematical facts, for example, and discovery over drill and kill.

Concept still trumps memorization. Textbooks often make sure students understand what multiplication means rather than offering exercises for learning multiplication facts. Some texts ask students to write down the addition that a problem like 4 x 3 represents. Most students do not have a difficult time understanding what multiplication means. But the necessity of memorizing the facts is still there. Rather than drill the facts, the texts have the students drill the concepts, and the student misses out on the basics of what she must ultimately know in order to do the problems. I've seen 4th and 5th graders, when

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## Anything-Goes Math

The National Science Foundation has funded math texts that meet the standards of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. Of these I am most familiar with the Everyday Mathematics (EM) series for grades K–6 because this one was adopted by the Fairfax County school district in Virginia, where I live. EM is now used by some 10 percent of the nation's elementary school students, including in New York City's more than six hundred grade schools. Of particular interest is EM's claim on its web site: "Previous efforts to reform mathematics instruction failed because they did not adequately consider the working lives of teachers."

This may help explain why EM believes that alternative algorithms and "student invented" algorithms make computation easier to understand and master. Students now have a variety of choices to multiply two- and three-digit numbers, including an ancient Egyptian method called "lattice multiplication." And instead of multiplying 45 x 24 in the traditional way, they can multiply 40 x 20, 5 x 20, 4 x 40, and 5 x 4 and add the four products. In fact, EM does not cover the traditional method of multiplying two-digit numbers until the 5th grade; 4th grade is spent mastering the alternatives.

Here is how EM explains its approach to the long-division algorithm, according to the *Teachers Reference Manual:*

"The authors of Everyday Math do not believe it is worth the time and effort to develop highly efficient paper-and-pencil algorithms for all possible whole number, fractions and decimal division problems....It is simply counterproductive to invest hours of precious class time on such algorithms. The math payoff is not worth the cost, particularly because quotients can be found quickly and accurately with a calculator."

In fact, long division has particular importance, not because of its ability to increase computational fluency, but because what makes it work (the distributive property) is an important concept that students will use later in algebra. It also plays an important role in uncovering another significant math concept: why fractions give rise to repeating decimals. Working out the division of numbers like 1/3 and 1/7 helps students see this; using a calculator does not.

Everyday Mathematics says it bases its claims on "research." For example, this from the *Teachers Reference Manual:*

"In one study, only 60 percent of U.S. ten-year-olds achieved mastery of the algorithm using the standard regrouping (borrowing) algorithm. A Japanese study found that only 56 percent of 3rd graders and 74 percent of 5th graders achieved mastery of this algorithm."

I e-mailed a set of questions about the study to the contact listed on Everyday Math's web site: What test was used? Were all schools tested? How was "failure" defined? Were any follow-up studies conducted? And similar questions about Japan. I remarked that a generation of adults appears to have mastered the traditional algorithms just fine. A few months later I received a reply from April Hattori, vice president of communications at McGraw-Hill, which publishes EM. She asked if I were a reporter, and how I planned to use the information. I responded that I was thinking of writing an article and my questions were meant to explore EM's claims that students do better when allowed to invent their own methods. I have received no further communications from Ms. Hattori.

*— Barry Garelick*

stumped by a multiplication fact such as 8 x 7, actually sum up 8, 7 times. Constructivists would likely point to a student's going back to first principles as an indication that the student truly understood the concept. Mathematicians tend to see that as a waste of time.

Another case in point was illustrated in an article that appeared last fall in the *New York Times*. It described a 4th-grade class in Ossining, New York, that used a constructivist approach to teaching math and spent one entire class period circling the even numbers on a sheet containing the numbers 1 to 100. When a boy who had transferred from a Catholic school told the teacher that he knew his multiplication tables, she quizzed him by asking him what 23 x 16 equaled. Using the old-fashioned method—one that is held in disdain because it uses rote memorization and is not discovered by the student—the boy delivered the correct answer. He knew how to multiply while the rest of the class was still discovering what multiples of 2 were.

### Enter Stage Left: The National Science Foundation

The NCTM standards received a boost of credibility in 1991 when the Education and Human Resources Division of the National Science Foundation funded two grant programs related to math education. The first was for state education departments that aligned their math standards with NCTM's and school districts that adopted constructivist math programs aligned with NCTM's standards; the second, for the development of commercial mathematics texts that also followed the NCTM party line, a spending program that now took NSF into the textbook business.



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Eventually, NSF supplemented grants to school districts by funding "distribution centers" that promoted the very programs NSF had helped to create. This "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" technique has worked well in enhancing the NCTM constructivist ethic and the texts that NSF helped develop. Meanwhile, NSF continues to fund revisions to some of those texts.

The imprimatur of the National Science Foundation on both NCTM's standards and the various textbooks they funded and NSF's grant program caused states to revise their standards of learning for mathematics. Case in point: In 1992, the California State Board of Education adopted the California Mathematics Framework—a set of standards based prominently on NCTM's standards of 1989.

## And Stage Right: the Right

By this time, people were beginning to notice. NSF's embrace of NCTM's philosophy of education, among other problems with the teaching of mathematics, became grist for Lynne Cheney, then an active senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. With well-articulated essays in leading media, Cheney took out after the educationists and won the respect of mathematicians and scientists as she helped raise awareness among a wider audience across the United States. Isolated math revolts began to occur. One of the first was in Silicon Valley, where parents are engineers, scientists, programmers, and mathematicians—and they didn't like the way their children were being taught mathematics. Two local mathematicians, Jim Milgram of Stanford and Hung-Hsi Wu of Berkeley, became key players in the rewriting of California's math standards and the elimination of NSF-funded books from the state's curriculum. Several years later, as I mentioned earlier, Wilfried Schmid from Harvard became active and helped rewrite Massachusetts's standards. Two other states, Minnesota and Michigan (Milgram and Wu went to the Wolverine State as well), also just recently revised their math standards. Minnesota's standards were changed due in large part to the efforts of Dr. Larry Gray, chair of the mathematics department at the University of Minnesota, and of concerned and outraged parents.

But the education bureaucracy did not roll over, and in the fall of 1999 the U.S. Department of Education released a list of ten recommended math programs, designated as "exemplary" or "promising," all of them aligned with the NCTM standards and based on texts funded by NSF.

The reaction was swift. More than two hundred university professors—including Milgram and Wu, Schmid, and several winners of the Fields Medal, the highest international award in mathematics—wrote an open letter to Secretary of Education Richard Riley, calling on the Department of Education to withdraw the recommendations. The open letter was also published as a full-page ad in the *Washington Post*, paid for by the Packard Humanities Institute, long a critic of constructivist education. The Department of Education did not withdraw the recommendations, but instead added two more NCTM-aligned books to the list.

The Education Department's 1999 list, as it represented a more visible—and seemingly overtly political—assertion of political will, was a critical point in the new-math wars. And when Lynne Cheney slammed the Clinton administration as she criticized math textbooks and the NSF in her editorials, she helped ensure that the math wars would become (as they remain) partisan. Republicans tended to be sympathetic to the issues, and some hearings were held. But nothing came of them, and no investigations into NSF and its funding practices were launched. No questions were asked about why the Department of Education didn't rely on mathematicians in the review of proposals for these programs, nor was anyone in the department ever questioned about the NCTM's education philosophy and the millions of tax dollars spent on texts that were the subject of fierce objections from 200 prominent mathematicians and scholars.

**Constructivism taken to extremes can result in students' not knowing what they have discovered, not knowing how to apply it, or, the worst case, discovering—and taking ownership of—the wrong answer.**

## An Evidentiary Interlude

In the various arguments about how best to teach math, educationists make the point that research shows that their approaches work best. I tend to be suspicious of that research, and apparently others are as well. Ironically, a recent study by the National Academy of Science's Mathematical Sciences



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Education Board, sponsored by the NSF itself, was also skeptical. "Evaluations of mathematics curricula provide important information for educators, parents, students and curriculum developers," concluded the NAS about 19 specific mathematics curricula, including all 13 NSF-sponsored curricula, that it analyzed. They all "fall short of the scientific standards necessary to gauge overall effectiveness."

While the proponents of these NSF-sponsored math programs may be able to claim that the research shows no evidence that the programs are "ineffective," the mathematics community, and parents who are protesting to the various school boards across the United States, can now claim that the research cannot be used to support claims of superior effectiveness—or any effectiveness at all.

Is there a common ground in this war? It seems that for now both sides agree that subject matter should be as important as pedagogy and that improving the math education of teachers is probably the most important weapon in the battle. What constitutes a proper math education for prospective teachers, however, is subject to debate. A mathematician I know who teaches at a small college told me that a graduate of his education school caused much embarrassment when, during the interview for a job in an elementary school, the job seeker was unable to add two fractions when asked to do so. The college's education department subsequently decided to put its math content courses under control of the math department.

## Meanwhile, Back on the Hill

Though academic debate about mathematics curricula will no doubt continue, the field of argument is increasingly muddied by politics. It was in this context that I began my investigation into math education in 2002. I recall meeting with Senator X's deputy chief of staff and two other staffers not long after completing my research on math curricula and the battles that had shaped—often, misshaped—them. "So what are your ideas on how math and science education can be enhanced?" they asked. My answer was something like, "You can enhance a car by painting it, but if the car has no engine, it's not going to do much good." This was not what they were expecting to hear. Nor were they expecting to hear that Lynne Cheney had also taken up the cause of anti-fuzzy math. At that point, the discussion took a decidedly troubling turn. These staffers—Democrats—now worried that they could not support policies that were also advocated by the wife of a powerful Republican.

**The staffers in my office talked with other Democratic staffers on the Hill, who told them that it would be wise to stay away from the "fuzzy math/Lynne Cheney/Bush agenda" issue.**

I told them about the open letter from the two hundred mathematicians and urged them not to confuse the message with the messenger. "This is a real issue," I said. "Kids aren't learning the math they need to learn."

I had discussions and sent e-mails in the hopes that I would at least get a chance to brief Senator X on the issue and, perhaps, persuade him to ask some tough questions of NSF when it came time to fund their programs. But I felt that at any moment everything was going to be whisked away.

And one day it was. The staffers in my office talked with other Democratic staffers on the Hill, who told them that it would be wise to stay away from the "fuzzy math/Lynne Cheney/Bush agenda" issue. Ultimately the staffers I was working with told me they couldn't take a chance on having Senator X "come off like Lynne Cheney."

This development was not surprising to any of the mathematicians with whom I had been working—most of them Democrats, like me. The senator was never briefed, and no investigation into NSF was launched. I was thanked for my hard work. I went back to my regular job and started tutoring middle school students in math at a school in D.C. while continuing to work with high school students in my neighborhood. That year a 9th-grade girl was having problems in geometry and came to me for help. "What seems to be the problem?" I asked. "I don't know how to do proofs," she said.

"I know," I replied. "Don't worry. It isn't you."

All politics is local, I decided.

*Barry Garelick is an analyst with a federal government agency in Washington, D.C.*

*The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author.*



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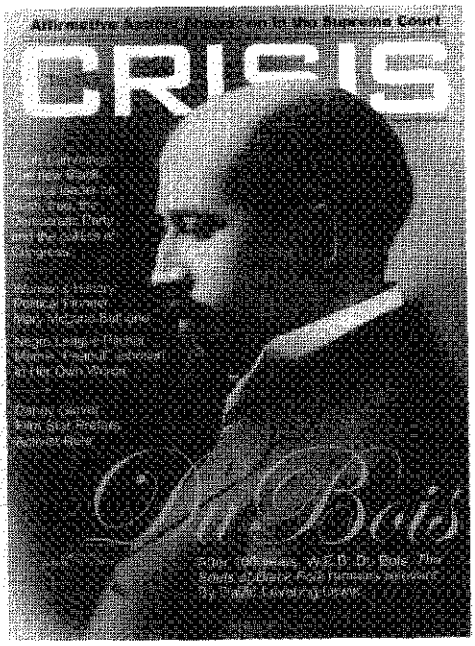


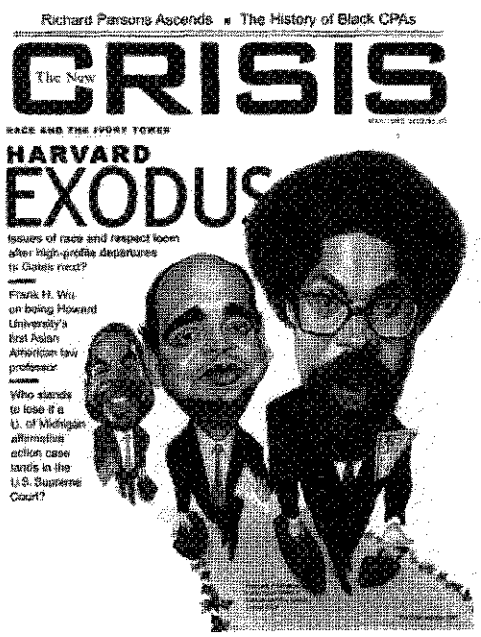
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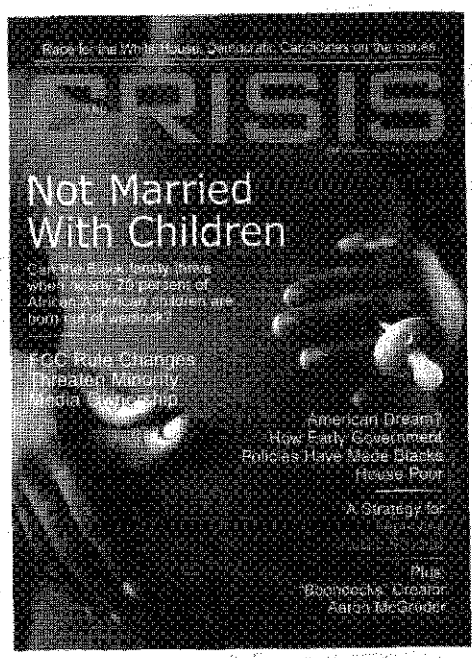
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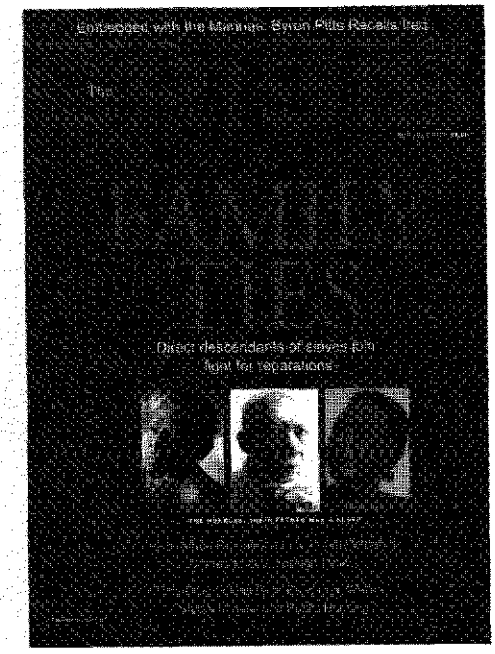
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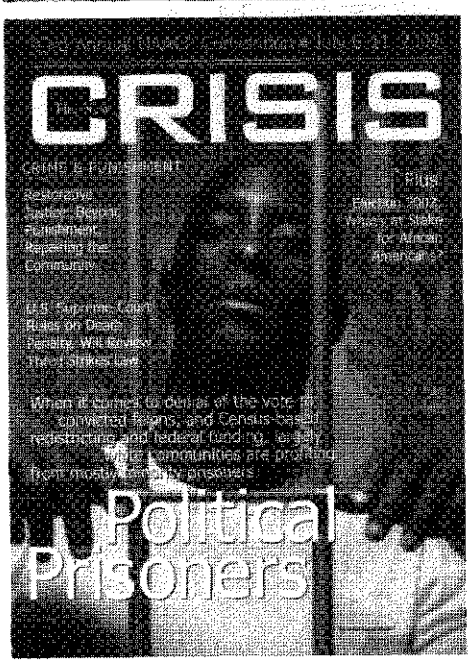


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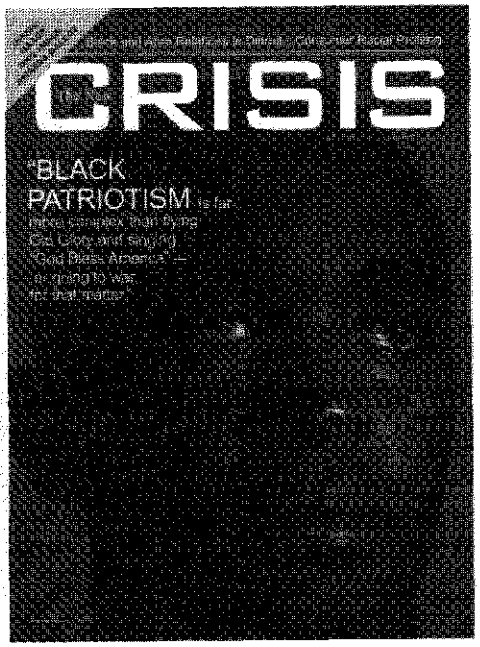


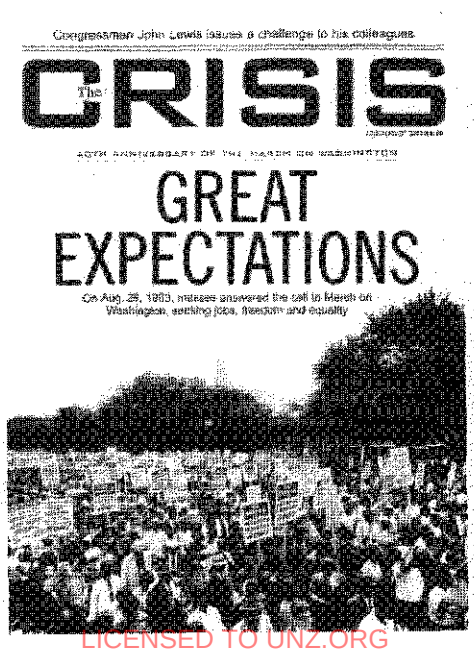
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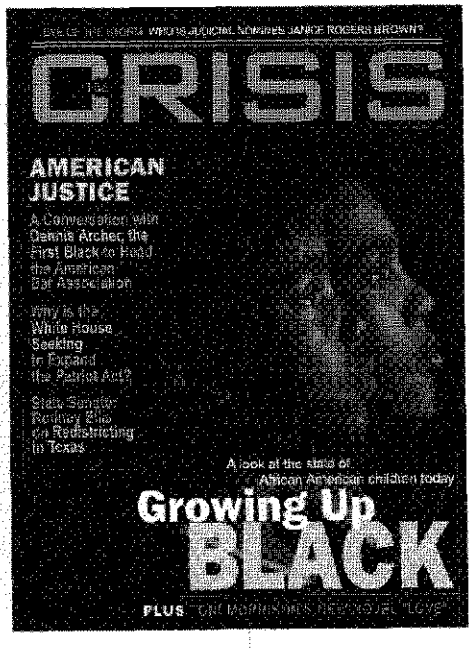
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# UNCIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

## Violating the Rules for Breaking the Law

BY JAMES J. LOPACH

AND

JEAN A. LUCKOWSKI

A new kind of civil disobedience came to Missoula, Montana, recently. On a bridge over the Clark Fork River, a group from Wild Rockies Earth First! blocked a truck carrying logs from the Bitterroot Forest. Two of the protesters tied ropes to the rig, lowered themselves and their sign, "Globalization Kills Our Forests," to within a few feet of the torrent below, and refused to cooperate with rescuers who were dispatched from local fire stations to "rescue" them. The Earth Firsters were eventually coaxed to safety and charged with felony criminal endangerment. At their arraignment they denied that they had put the firefighters at risk, demanded to be set free, and ridiculed the conditions of their release on bail. One defendant brandished what a local newspaper called her "flame-and-monkey-wrench tattoos," an emblem, apparently, of her willingness to wreck rather than to respect government.

Earth First's brand of civil disobedience—frequently ill-tempered, not always nonviolent, and often coolly self-righteous—seems to be increasingly popular these days. Groups as diverse as ACT UP (gay rights), Critical Mass (environmental bicyclists), even the archconservative Catholic League are getting on the civil disobedience bandwagon. After the Ninth Circuit Court upheld a ban on "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance in 2003, the League's president wrote, "It is up to the teachers in the nine western states affected by this decision to break the law. They should instruct their students on the meaning of civil disobedience and then practice it." Some of the new breed of lawbreakers lay claim to the traditions of civil disobedience. ACT UP, for instance, says its "fusion of organized mass struggle and nonviolence...originated largely with Mohandas Gandhi." Appreciation of that past seems to be shockingly selective, however. Indeed, as even the Catholic League president insinuated, our schools, incubators of civic culture, play a significant role in instructing students about civil disobedience. But are American schools teaching the fundamentals of the social contract? Do our teachers appreciate that there is more to civil disobedience than mere self-expression or simple claims on conscience?



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## Not Your Father's Disobedience

Traditional civil disobedience has usually combined deep spiritual beliefs with intense political ones. And while appreciating the differences in the two worlds—render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's—practitioners respected both. Gandhi, for instance, while leading a massive populist movement against British occupation of India (in the 1930s and 1940s), grew distrustful of mass demonstrations because participants were unwilling to go through the difficult process of purifying their actions; that is, grounding their activism in religious faith and human dignity. Martin Luther King, who warned

**"There are necessary evils in our struggles, such as the use of petro-fuels in igniting huge bonfires in which we can watch corporations go bankrupt."**

*— Craig Marshall, Earth Liberation Front*

that civil disobedience risked anarchy, went to jail "openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty."

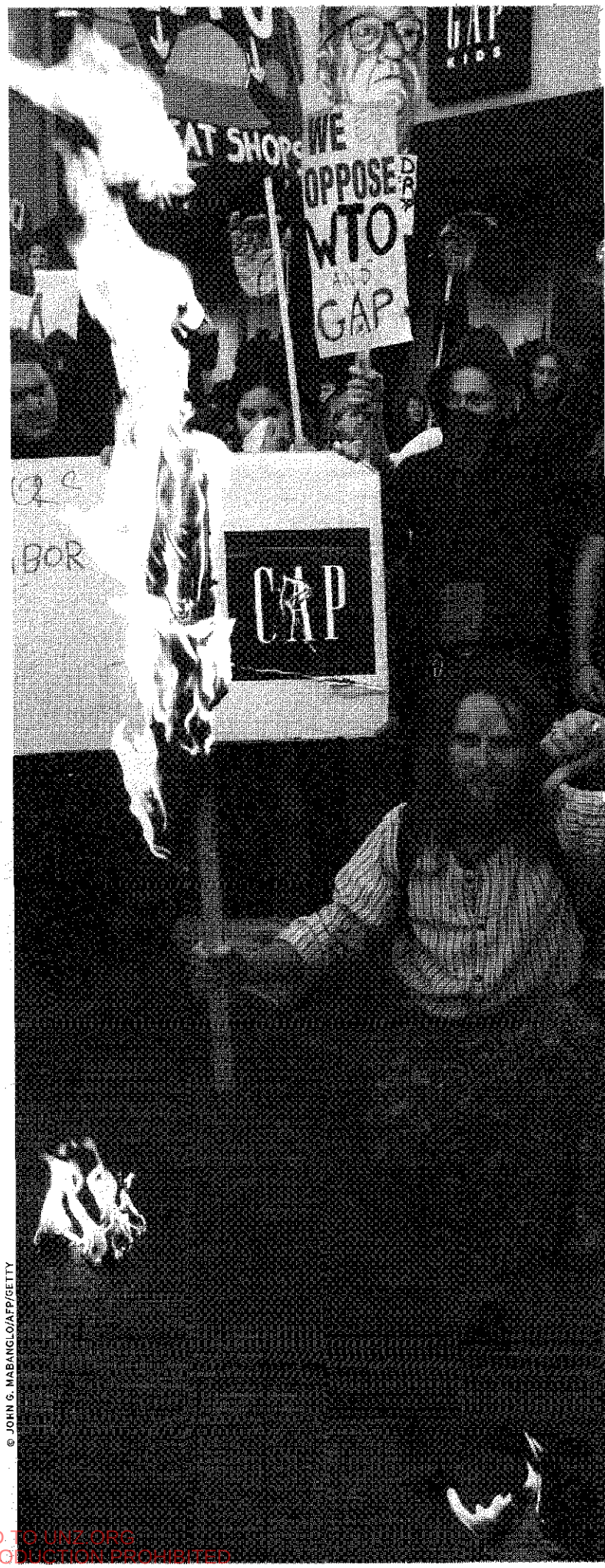
While sometimes willful and defiant and sometimes passive to the point of self-extinction (Socrates did not protest his punishment), the heroes of civil disobedience believed in the need to obey a higher authority and to be cleansed of self-interestedness. For instance, King's words from an Alabama jail cell in 1963 (where he was being punished for marching in defiance of a court order): "A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God.... An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law." Compare those sentiments with the words written 40 years later by Craig Marshall, an Earth Liberation Front activist, from his Oregon jail cell (where he was serving a five-year term for setting fire to logging trucks): "There are necessary evils if we want to be effective in our struggles, such as the use of petro-fuels in igniting huge bonfires in which we can watch corporations go bankrupt.... I hope I don't sound as if I'm condemning these activities—by all means, burn the [expletive deleted] to the ground."

Compare the reasoning of Gandhi and King, who presume harmony between a moral order and a rightly formed conscience, to the rationalizing of Earth First! and its political

**Traditional civil disobedience combined deep spiritual beliefs with intense political ones.**

cousin the Earth Liberation Front (ELF). For Earth First! an ethic of "Deep Ecology" justifies "using all the tools in the tool box—ranging from grassroots organizing [to] monkey wrenching [which includes] ecotage, ecodefense, billboard bandits, desurveying, road reclamation, tree spiking."

Similarly, the Earth Liberation Front argues that "dependence on the substances in the natural environment" justifies "more and more step[ping] outside of this societal law to enforce natural law" and boasts that since late 1997 "there have been over two

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dozen major actions performed by the ELF in North America alone resulting in nearly $40 million in damage."

In many respects Martin Luther King would seem to have more in common with the Supreme Court, which dismissed his Birmingham appeal, than with modern protesters. "In fair administration of justice no man can be judge in his own case," the Court wrote in 1967, "however exalted his station, however righteous his motives, and irrespective of his race, color, politics, or religion.... Respect for judicial process is a small price to pay for the civilizing hand of law, which alone can give abiding meaning to constitutional freedom."

## Then and Now—and Then Again

In 1972, when the United States was experiencing race riots, war protests, and campus violence, Harvard political scientist Edward C. Banfield penned an essay, "How Many, and Who, Should Be Set at Liberty?" describing an American society spinning out of control. Banfield sounded an alarm that should resonate

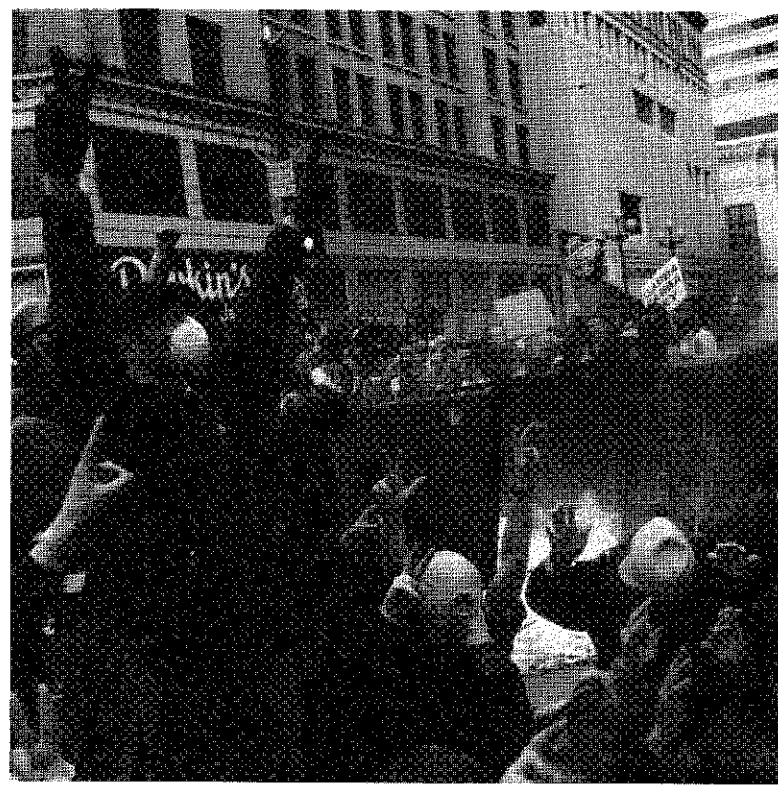
**"A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God."**

*— Martin Luther King*

for teachers, administrators, and curriculum committees today as they consider their civic education duties. Banfield quoted John Locke grouching about youth's innate "inability to control impulses and to take the future into account." He went on to warn that society would only prolong this adolescent predisposition if it instructed the individual "that he must be his own ultimate judge of what is right and wrong and that the 'moral censure' of anyone claiming authority over him is mere opinion." Quoting another political philosopher, John Stuart Mill, Banfield notes that no society can reasonably expect a liberated individual to naturally "accept and act upon certain indispensable social rules," and so society must transmit the wisdom and authority of "received opinion" to its young lest they remain mere children.

Unfortunately, contemporary social studies practice runs the risk of increasing, more than decreasing, the likelihood that students leave schools as mere children. Even aside from the question of whether schools are adequately exposing students to ideas of political theorists like Locke and Mill (much less to those of Plato, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, or Thomas Jefferson), the learning theory known as "constructivism" has encouraged the ahistorical trend. Now widely accepted among educators, constructivism has, inadvertently perhaps, undermined a sense of responsibility to the larger community by, as Diane Ravitch has observed, encouraging students to "construct...their own knowledge through their own discoveries."

When viewed simply as a student-centered methodology and poorly applied, constructivism can—and does—lead to inadequate teacher-led explanations of complex ideas like that of the "unjust law." And by emphasizing that children are their own measure of things, teachers shirk their responsibility as subject-matter experts. Students with a faulty moral compass and nothing but half-baked opinions come away from the classroom thinking that laws are simply inconvenient obstacles to achieving personal goals.



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*Many modern protests, like those against U.S. trade policy (above and previous page) feature anarchists, whose tactics are not always peaceful.*

## What's Taught—What's Not

In fact, there are civil disobedience lesson plans, but most are based on poorly applied constructivist theory. One developed by Gallaudet University, for instance, invites high school students to compare the Underground Railroad with some other act of civil disobedience in U.S. history, but offers no basic definition of the concept and instead simplistically asks students "when they might consider breaking the law because it is unjust." Typical of these lesson plans, it is thin on substance, leaves the students to teach themselves about



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civil disobedience, and does not help teachers whose own knowledge of civil disobedience is weak.

Even the best of social studies materials can set students on the wrong track. A PBS lesson plan on civil disobedience, packaged with the video, "A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict," says that Gandhi's method of nonviolence had three parts: "identify an unjust law..., refuse to obey it, and accept the consequences." While more substantive than many such materials, the PBS lesson still leaves out the critical Gandhian step of self-purification. According to Gandhi, who was also known as Mahatma, or "Great Soul," this is the time when practitioners must make a "total moral commitment," that is, commit themselves to "a living faith in a living God" and not to a "useful political strategy in a specific situation." This is no small matter in the civil disobedience tradition—and it could be considered a major omission from the PBS lesson. King, too, urged his followers to steel themselves to passive nonviolence in the manner of Jesus Christ. For Gandhi and King, law-breaking is justified only when it respects authority and recognizes the opponent's human dignity.

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*During part of the famous Selma to Montgomery Freedom March in 1965, Martin Luther King and fellow civil rights leaders wore the Hawaiian necklace of flowers—the lei—to symbolize their peaceful intentions.*

Another PBS lesson plan on civil disobedience asks students to identify "issues of concern" (such as school uniforms or a tax exemption for a business that pollutes), "brainstorm different ways people make their opinions known about issues of concern," "discuss which of these methods are 'acceptable' means of protest to them," and "identify possible negative consequences of activism to individuals engaged in these activities." Missing from the plan is a definition of civil disobedience or mention of the four essential components of civil disobedience—or even the three components that they had identified in the earlier lesson. Nor does the lesson discuss the difference between a fundamental principle and a personal desire or between legal protest, civil disobedience, and purely criminal activity, much less the threats that each poses to a democratic society. In these and other lessons, the teacher is directed to place the burden on the student to "construct" his or her own understanding of civil disobedience—a notion that contradicts the beliefs of the most profound protesters.

In matters of civil disobedience such constructivism only pushes students toward a naive belief in the primacy of conscience (which can easily become a synonym for self-centeredness). Even the Center for Civic Education, a 40-year-old nonprofit organization whose National Advisory Committee reads like a Who's Who of democratic values and traditions (including a dozen current and former members of Congress and a couple of Supreme Court justices), does not explain in its curriculum standards that civil disobedience is rooted in fundamental principles as opposed to personal preferences.

**"An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law."**

*— Martin Luther King*

## A Defective Canon

It is not surprising, then, that history and government textbooks, increasingly shaped by loose standards, incomplete assessments, and a generation of constructivist pedagogy, poorly serve the teacher's critical need for solid information about civil disobedience. Many U.S. history textbooks make only superficial mention of civil disobedience, generally in relation to the modern civil-rights movement. One widely used 8th-grade text, *American Odyssey*, by Gary Nash, contends that King followed the "Gandhian strategy of nonviolence...investigation, negotiation, publicity, and demonstration," but omits mention of self-purification and the need to accept the consequences of one's actions.

Twelfth-grade American government texts, where a political theory perspective is expected, routinely say almost nothing



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about civil disobedience. The Center for Civic Education's secondary-level *We the People* ignores the acceptance of consequences in its answer to the question, "Must you obey bad rules?" Another senior government text (*American Government*, by Steven Kelman) implies that all peaceful protest is legal protest and describes King's nonviolent activities without explaining civil disobedience. Though these texts do not specifically condone civil disobedience, neither do they encourage students to consider the wisdom of the past while making their own judgments.

To provide some perspective on the question of what is *not* taught in most civics texts, we look at *American Civics* by William Hartley and William Vincent. They provide one of the more succinct definitions of civil disobedience offered to high schoolers: "The right of all Americans to express their dissent against laws in these and many other ways is protected by the Constitution. People do not have the right, however, to break the laws while expressing their dissent.... During the civil-rights movement, and at other times in the past, some Americans have shown their dissent by intentionally disobeying laws they believed to be wrong. This practice is called civil disobedience. As you know, people who disobey a law must face the consequences." This kind of treatment is needed for students who should be wrestling with fundamental concepts of government rather than their personal feelings about it.

## Do as I Say—Or as I Do?

A student's inclination to cross the line of legality under the guise of self-expression can also be abetted by imprudent teachers.

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*In a well-considered exercise in civil disobedience, Rosa Parks recreates her historic December 1, 1955, protest against segregated busing in Montgomery, Alabama—this, on the day, December 21, 1956, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that her 1955 arrest was illegal.*

According to a 2003 report in a Maryland newspaper, a local high school English teacher, as part of a lesson on Henry David Thoreau, urged his students to perform a "nonconformist act." Two young women were suspended from school after they stood on top of a cafeteria table, staged a long kiss, and shouted "End homophobia now!" What lessons the teacher drew from this event we do not know. But such pedagogy merely trivial-


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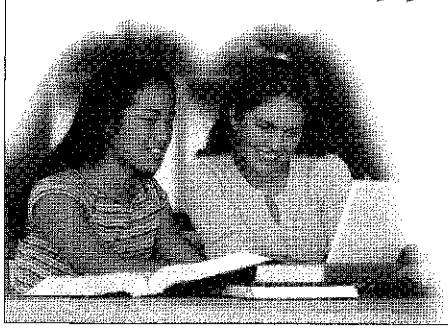

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**Students with a faulty moral compass and nothing but half-baked opinions come away from the classroom thinking that laws are simply inconvenient obstacles to achieving personal goals.**

izes civil disobedience and panders to students' desires to be outrageous and to make adults uncomfortable.

A Kentucky high school teacher took negative role modeling further, getting convicted for trespassing on the U.S. government's Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation at Fort Benning, Georgia, and then fired for missing class while serving her 90-day jail sentence. While she complained, according to *Education Week*, that the school district should have granted her a leave of absence, a letter writer to the newspaper reminded the teacher of her history: "While civil disobedience and legal protest have long been used as ways of attracting attention to a cause, civil disobedience is unique because it has always carried with it the obvious risk of arrest and possible imprisonment."

Though the trespassing teacher is surely an anomaly, her apparent failure to appreciate the important nuances in balancing liberty and authority is an all-too-common failing of the new civil disobedience. Coming to the correct balance means neither empowering political majorities to regulate liberty in new ways nor excusing individuals from the consequences of their actions. Getting the balance right means thwarting the present trend toward teaching the tenets of personal autonomy and ignoring the history that has already taught us much about the need for—and limits of—legitimate government. The forces that shape civics education—teachers, standards, methods, and materials—have important roles to play. But they must state clearly that civil disobedience differs from peaceful and legal protest; that civil disobedience involves violating a law that a rightly formed conscience determines to be in conflict with a fundamental principle of human dignity; and that civil disobedience is circumscribed by the practitioner's obligation to honor legitimate government by accepting punishment openly and respectfully. Without this tilt toward authority and away from anarchy, individual liberty will be endangered.

*James J. Lopach is a professor in the department of political science at the University of Montana, where he teaches American government and public law.*
*Jean A. Luckowski is a professor in the department of curriculum and instruction at the University of Montana, where she teaches social studies methods and professional ethics.*
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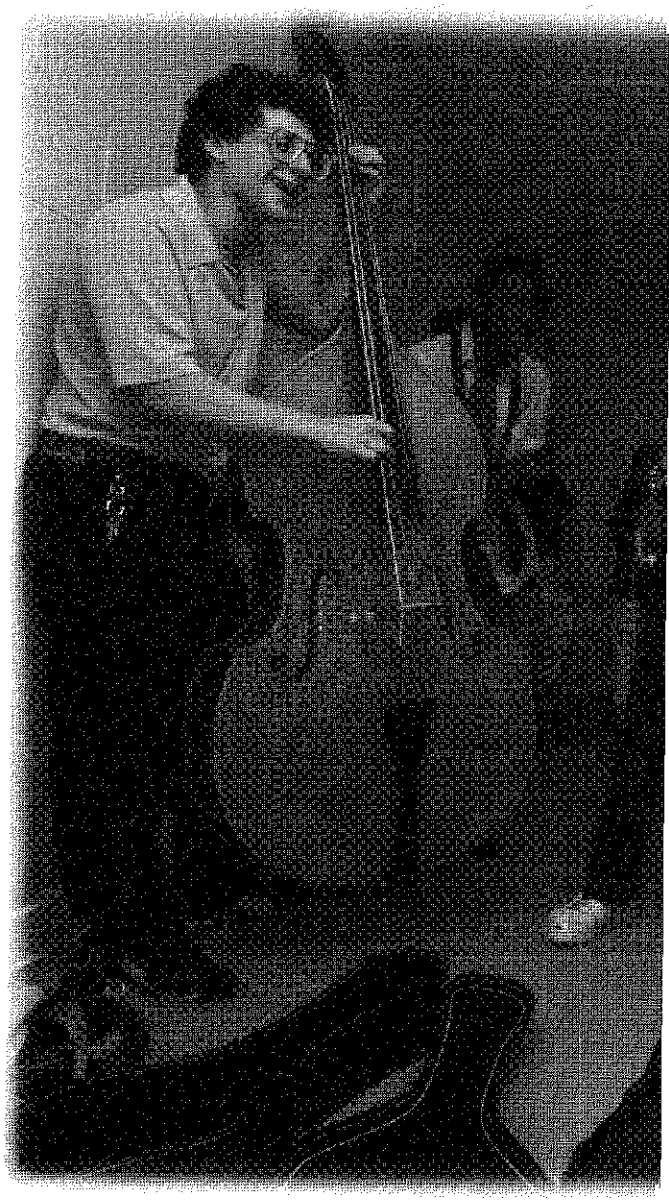
# No Longer FAMOUS but Still INTACT

BY CHRISTINE H. ROSSELL



**The year was 1968.** Martin Luther King had been assassinated, and American cities were erupting in flames because of King's violent death and the decades-long smoldering resentments from racism. In a small city far away from the churning ghettos of Detroit and D.C., a small public school was about to enter the racial hubbub and become part of education history.

That fall, McCarver Elementary in Tacoma, Washington, hung out its shingle inviting students from anywhere in the city to enroll, breaking the link between school assignments and residential location and becoming the nation's first "magnet" school. Thus began a nationwide experiment to integrate public schools using market-like incentives instead of court orders. (See sidebar, "In the Beginning," page 47.)

The following year, 1969, the country's second magnet school opened—this one, more appropriately, in Boston, soon to be an epicenter of the race-based school wars. But, like its West Coast

# Magnet



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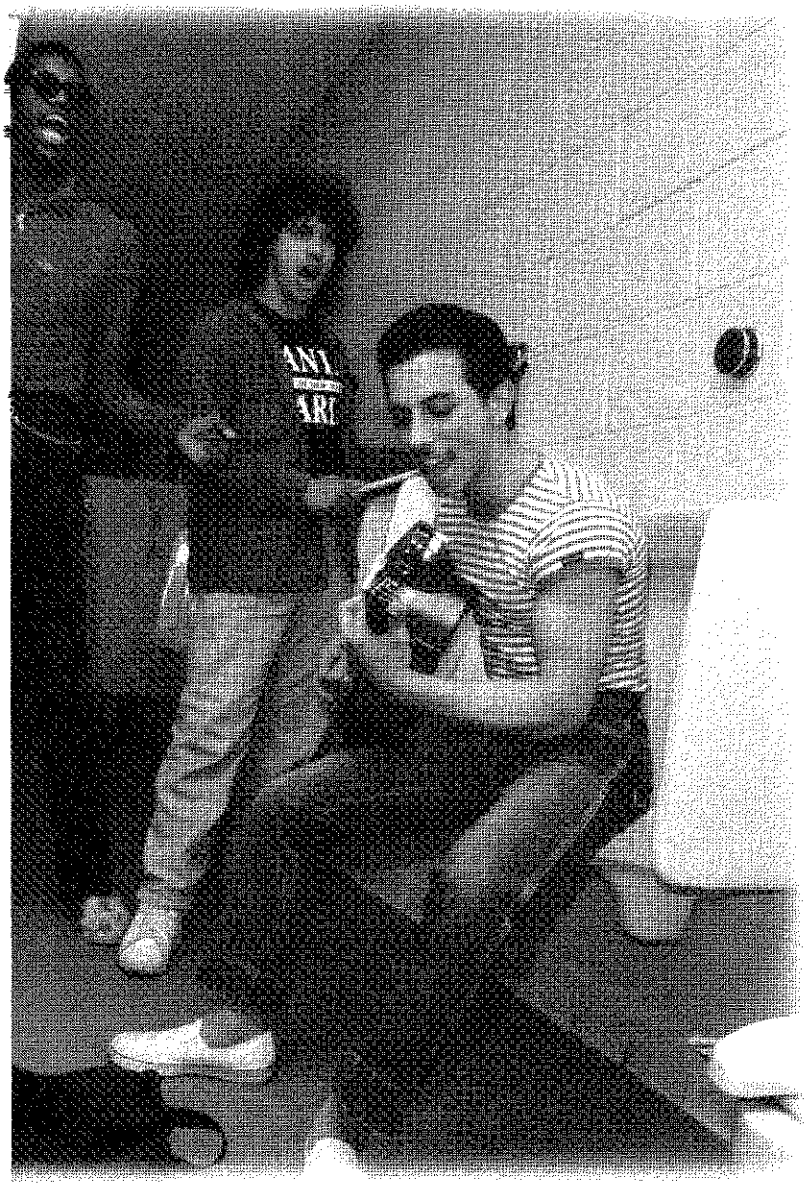

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*Reminiscent of scenes from the movie and musical Fame, which featured the High School of Music & Art and became a model for magnet schools, young musicians sing and play in a bathroom at La Guardia High School in Manhattan.*

counterpart, the William Monroe Trotter School, in Beantown's poor Roxbury section, was built as "a showcase for new methods of teaching"—enough of a showcase, it was hoped, to attract white children to a black neighborhood for their schooling. It was an odd idea, but one whose time seemed to have come. Within a decade there would be hundreds of such magnet schools all over the country.

The idea was simple enough: draw white students to predominantly black schools by offering a special education with a focus on a particular aspect of the curriculum, such as performing arts, or Montessori, or advanced math, science, and technology. Federal and state agencies, anxious to avoid the growing messiness of coercive integration measures like forced busing, directed new resources toward these magnets, encouraging their pioneering academic programs and giving grants for new facilities. Glossy brochures were mailed to parents and press releases to local media. The hope was that these well-funded, themed schools would ignite a passion for learning as well as spark a movement to voluntarily integrate schools.

The names alone give a sense of the new schools' range and optimism—the Thomas Pullham Creative and Performing Arts magnet (in Prince George's County, Maryland), the Copley Square International High magnet (in Boston), the School 59 Science magnet (also called the "Zoo School," in Buffalo), the Greenfield Montessori magnet school (in Milwaukee), the Central High School Classical Greek/Computers Unlimited magnet high school (in Kansas City). Even older and well-established "examination schools," such as Boston Latin and City Honors (in Buffalo), would soon claim magnet status to avail themselves of new students and additional funds.

## An Early Experiment in "Choice"

The first magnets appeared as the school desegregation battles were heating up. In 1969, the year William Monroe Trotter opened in Boston, a federal court ordered the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district in North Carolina to use busing to desegregate its schools. The use of crosstown busing to accomplish desegregation was unprecedented—and the case went right to the Supreme Court, which ruled in favor of the highly controversial forced integration program in 1971. A federal district court in Boston, paying insufficient attention to the ideals of the Trotter school, introduced a forced busing program in 1974 that set off demonstrations and riots. The court order also prompted the city's educators to include magnets in their formal, citywide forced busing plan the following

Schools



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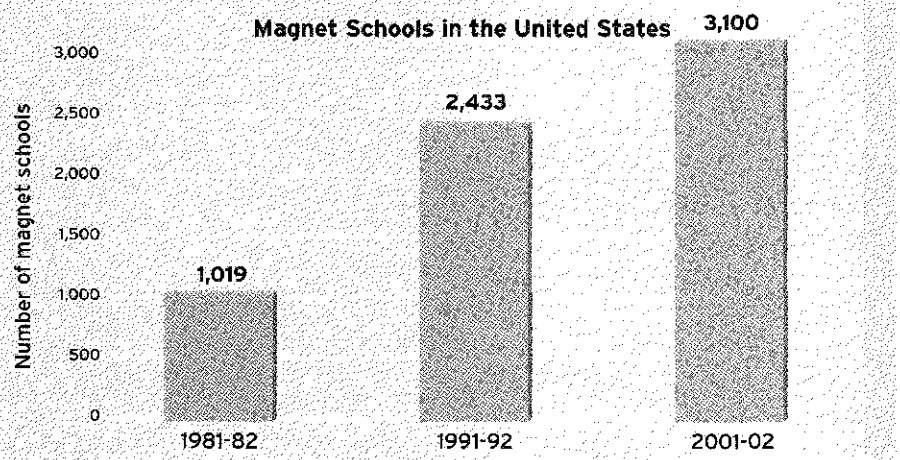
## Enduring Attraction (Figure 1)

*It was not quite as simple as "build them and they will come," but magnet schools have proved to be a lasting element of American education.*




**SOURCE:** National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and estimated from Source Book of the Magnet Schools Association of America

year. Thus was born the first "forced busing plan with magnet options."

Coming as they did, in the midst of several different national desegregation crises, early magnet schools offered a relatively uncontroversial—and peaceful—means of integrating schools. And the magnet movement got an early boost from two federal district court decisions in 1976, in the aftermath of the discord in Charlotte and Boston. In approving magnet-driven, voluntary desegregation programs in Buffalo and Milwaukee, the courts seemed more than willing to accept reasonable alternatives to the forced dissolution of geography-based school assignments.

Though it was another decade before the first southern school district (in Savannah) was allowed to desegregate its school system with a voluntary magnet-school plan, the new schools were soon opening almost everywhere—or, at least, everywhere that public school systems needed to stem the white-flight resegregation that was overtaking many urban school districts, mostly in the North. By 1981, there were some 1,000 such magnet schools in the United States; by 1991, there were over 2,400. (See Figure 1.)

These new schools proved to be a remarkably robust and popular trend in school choice. In a study I undertook in 1989, I found that 12 percent of the elementary and middle school magnet programs in my sample specialized in basic skills and/or individualized teaching; 11 percent offered foreign language immersion; 11 percent were science-, math-, or computer-oriented; 10 percent catered to the gifted and talented and 10 percent to the creative and performing arts; 8 percent were traditional, back-to-basics programs (demanding, for instance, dress codes and contracts with parents for supervision of homework); 7 percent were college preparatory; 7 percent were early childhood and Montessori. (The remaining preferences, each under 7 percent, included multicultural/international, life skills/careers, and ecology/environment.) At the high school level, the programs tended to be either career-oriented (medical careers, law and criminal justice, communications and mass media, hotel and restaurant) or schools with some sort of entrance criteria. The Magnet Schools Association of America, based in Washington, D.C., reports a similar distribution of program themes in today's magnet schools.

My analyses of the success of these magnets in actually attracting whites indicate that school structure and racial composition was important. Predictably, the most popular magnet school structure was a dedicated magnet, where everyone in the school had chosen it and all were in the magnet program. These "perfect" magnets, however, were the least common, because creating them requires that an entire school be emptied out and children assigned elsewhere or a new school be built. The next most popular magnet structure, and the most common today, is a program-within-a-school. Only students who chose the magnet program are in it, but there is also a neighborhood population assigned to the school that is not in the magnet program. The racial composition of the magnet program is different from the school that houses it and is usually around 50 percent white. The least-popular magnet structure in black neighborhoods is a "whole-school-attendance-zone" magnet: everyone in the school is in the program, but the school has a neighborhood population assigned to it. That these schools and their magnet programs tend to have a racial composition closer to that of the neighborhood—majority minority—only reduces their attractiveness to whites. However, according to most surveys, although whites prefer majority white schools, a sizable, albeit smaller, number will choose schools where whites make up somewhat less than half of the student body.

### Staying Power and an Evolving Mission

Even as courts across the country began releasing school districts such as Kansas City, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Savannah, Buffalo, and Boston from long-running desegregation orders during the 1990s, magnet schools continued to



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thrive. My 1991 randomized national sample of 600 school districts indicated that the 2,400 magnet schools in the United States were operating in 229 different school districts.

And it would appear that their ranks continue to swell despite the declining number of districts operating under court-ordered desegregation plans. The directory published by the Magnet Schools Association of America lists more than 3,000 magnet or theme-based schools as members.

With desegregation waning as a public goal, however, magnet schools have maintained support by attaching themselves to the school-choice movement. For instance, the Magnet Schools of America web site now makes a classic choice-based argument on behalf of magnet schools—that being allowed to choose a school will result in improved satisfaction that translates into better achievement. Thus, although proponents of magnet schools have not disavowed the desegregation goal that is the program's roots, they currently place almost equal emphasis on magnets as instruments of school choice.

One of the reasons for the sustained growth of magnet schools is the federal government's steady financial support for the idea. Magnet schools were originally funded as tools of desegregation under the Emergency School Assistance Act from 1972 to 1981. In 1981 they were folded into the Chapter 2 block-grant program, but explicit federal support for magnet schools as desegregation tools resumed in 1985 with the authorization of the Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP), included in the Education for Economic Security Act. Under the new program, however, magnet schools not only had to aid desegregation, but also had to focus on improving the quality of education in order to qualify for funds. The Magnet Schools Assistance Program still exists, now run by the Office of Innovation and Improvement in the Department of Education, and with the same twin goals of fostering integration and choice.

## In the Beginning

*How a Small City in the Pacific Northwest Invented Magnet Schools*

*by Alex Sergienko*

Every once in a while things work out. That's what it seems like today, as I look back to 1968, when my Tacoma, Washington, school district opened a magnet school. Though Tacoma had only about 7,000 blacks—out of a total population of about 160,000—our minority housing, like that in many cities, was concentrated in one area and served by schools then in violation of our state's de facto segregation rule. The worst "offender" was McCarver Elementary, which was 91 percent African-American.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF ALEX SERGIENKO

In fact, we had begun work on segregation issues several years earlier. People were coming to school board meetings complaining about it, and one prominent board member was adamant about integration. We also had a citizens committee, with two African-American members, actively seeking solutions. And, like other cities, we had some racial disturbances in Tacoma after Martin Luther King's assassination.

We knew we had to do something, but we also wanted alternatives to the coercive methods of integration, such as forced busing, that we saw being talked about elsewhere. That's when we stumbled on an article about someone in Pittsburgh advocating the establishment of a school that would do something so well that students would want to enroll. They called it a "magnet school." I'd never heard the term, but suddenly we envisioned McCarver as a school of excellence—good enough to pull in white students from the more affluent neighborhoods. We wrote a proposal, called the "Exemplary Magnet Program," and in the summer of 1968 we received a $200,000 Title III grant to make it happen.

We then mounted a huge recruitment effort, enlisting counselors from our summer program to make home visits (to talk to parents) and had administrators make calls to the district's best teachers. We said again and again that we would use exemplary practices, such as team teaching and "continuous progress"—and it worked. Some very good teachers signed up. And we brought in the most popular principal, then at the best elementary school in town, to run things.

With luck, a lot of work, and some key support from members of the upscale North End community, we were able to draw kids from all over, even from suburban schools on the other side of Puget Sound. And we opened that September with a minority enrollment of 64 percent, a 27-point turnaround in just four months. Instead of 50 white kids, we had almost 200.

By 1970, African-American enrollment at McCarver was less than 50 percent, and we had a waiting list for parents seeking to enroll their children.

After 36 years, I'm still struck by what we were able to get done. It is wonderful to think that good things can be accomplished in this world.

*Alex Sergienko was an assistant superintendent of schools in Tacoma when McCarver started its magnet program. His grandson Max is a 7th grader at a magnet school, in Portland, Oregon, with "a Japanese emphasis."*



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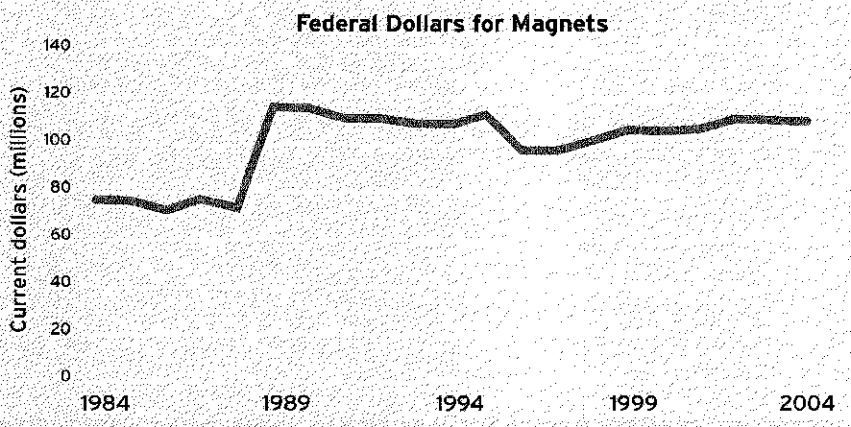
## A Loyal Following (Figure 2)

*Aside from a reauthorization increase in 1988, federal funding through the Magnet Schools Assistance Program has remained steady over the past two decades.*




SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Budget History Table

Funding for magnet schools is also part of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, housed in the portion of the law bannered "Promoting Informed Parental Choice and Innovative Programs." Funding has not kept pace with either inflation or the growth in magnet schools, but neither has it withered away. (See Figure 2.) The MSAP appropriation was $75 million in 1984, rose to $108 million in 1994, and remained at $108 million in 2004. Though the program falls under the law's choice provisions, the federal government still considers magnets an important aspect of desegregation policy, defining a magnet school as one that "offers a special curriculum capable of attracting substantial numbers of students of different racial backgrounds."

### The Money Bite

Perhaps the greatest challenge to magnet schools now comes from fiscal constraints at the state level. Where desegregation has become a secondary goal, resource-rich magnet schools are often a target for cuts when money is tight. States such as Missouri, Ohio, and Michigan have challenged court-ordered desegregation plans in order to reduce their financial and legal liability. But even states such as Massachusetts, Maryland, and California that were never parties to a desegregation lawsuit have been cutting funds for magnet schools. The Prince George's County, Maryland, school district, for example, eliminated magnet programs at 33 schools in the fall of 2004 because of state funding cutbacks. The only theme programs that will be kept are the Montessori, French immersion, and creative and performing arts, and they will no longer be called magnets.

Indeed, there is probably no school district with an extensive system of magnet programs that has not closed at least one or two magnets because of a budget crunch. In fact, many magnets are the victims of their own success: by the 1990s most neighborhood schools had the science labs and computer technology that had once made magnets unique. Even McCarver in Tacoma removed "magnet" from its name in 1998 and, as a result of No Child Left Behind, became a School in Need of Improvement.

Connecticut is an important exception to this trend, but that is because since 1996, the entire state has been under a state supreme court order to desegregate. Using a complicated formula approved by the court, the state funds magnet schools that accept students from several different districts (at a minimum there must be two) at a per-pupil rate that increases as the number of districts sending students increases—an attempt to bring central-city minority students and white suburban students together in the same school. Thus the scheme eschews outright racial quotas, but achieves some of the diversity that quotas would create.

**The greatest challenge to magnet schools now comes from fiscal constraints at the state level.**

### Challenges for the Future

Though finances will always be a magnet school's primary concern, the greatest threat to the magnet system going forward is the same as that which gave magnets their early jump-start: the courts. Even the No Child Left Behind Act's requirement that school districts adopt a voluntary desegregation plan,



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for instance, may conflict with legal precedents set in most federal appeals courts. In 2001 only the federal appeals court covering the states of Connecticut, New York, and Vermont had upheld the use of race in student assignment or magnet school admissions in school districts not already under court order; it did so on the grounds that the state had a compelling interest in racial diversity. But even in that circuit, several school districts and one state (Connecticut) have continued to avoid the use of racial quotas in magnet admissions because they believe using them invites a legal challenge.

**The idea was simple enough: draw white students to black schools by offering a special curriculum, such as performing arts, or Montessori, or advanced math, science, and technology.**

The 2002 U.S. Supreme Court decision outlawing the use of racial quotas at the University of Michigan—but approving the use of race as one of many factors in admissions decisions—has had little impact on magnet schools, mainly because most had already abandoned the use of quotas. And most school districts now recognize that using explicit racial quotas in magnet admissions when desegregation orders have been lifted is risky. When the court-ordered desegregation plan in Prince George's County was ended in 2002, the superintendent formed a panel of experts on magnet schools that was thought to be politically and ideologically diverse. Our task was to figure out what to do about magnet school admissions criteria.

All of us were in agreement that race could no longer be used in magnet admissions. We devised a plan in which the district was divided into three subdistricts of roughly similar racial and socioeconomic balance. Students, regardless of their race, could choose any magnet school in their subdistrict. We hoped that racially diverse student bodies would result from the individual choices of students, but there was no way to guarantee it. Since then, as noted above, state funding cuts have prompted the district's administration to dramatically reduce the number of magnet schools, keeping only the most popular. Similar choices are being made in other districts, where some magnets survive while others are being closed.

Districts throughout the country are responding in one of two ways: either adopting a race-blind system of admissions, thus converting the magnet to a themed school of choice; or constructing a system whereby race is only one of several factors considered in admission. The former is more likely to happen in school districts that have very few whites left and in districts that have had strong appeals court opinions rejecting the use of race altogether. The latter is more likely to occur in school districts such as Fort Wayne, Indiana, that have enough whites left to actually integrate a number of magnet schools and where there has been no strong circuit court decision rejecting the use of race.

It is remarkable, perhaps, that despite the reduction in state funding and the elimination of explicit racial quotas, the total number of magnet schools has not declined. I would suggest three reasons for their resilience. First, the great triumph of the civil-rights movement was its success in getting whites to support the principle of racial diversity in the schools. In districts that still have enough whites to make integration feasible, magnet schools are viewed as an effective way to achieve that diversity, even in districts where court orders have been lifted or never existed. Second, magnet schools have been incorporated into the school choice movement as a means of improving achievement and into No Child Left Behind as a way of increasing the opportunities available to children in low-performing schools. Third, parents like school choice. Although undoubtedly there are some who enroll their children in a theme-based school in order to enable them to pursue a passion, most parents are probably interested in theme-based education as a means of *igniting* a passion. Magnets have thus developed strong constituencies locally and nationally and, for the foreseeable future, remain an important, if less often noticed, feature of the American education landscape.

*Christine Rossell is a professor of political science at Boston University.*



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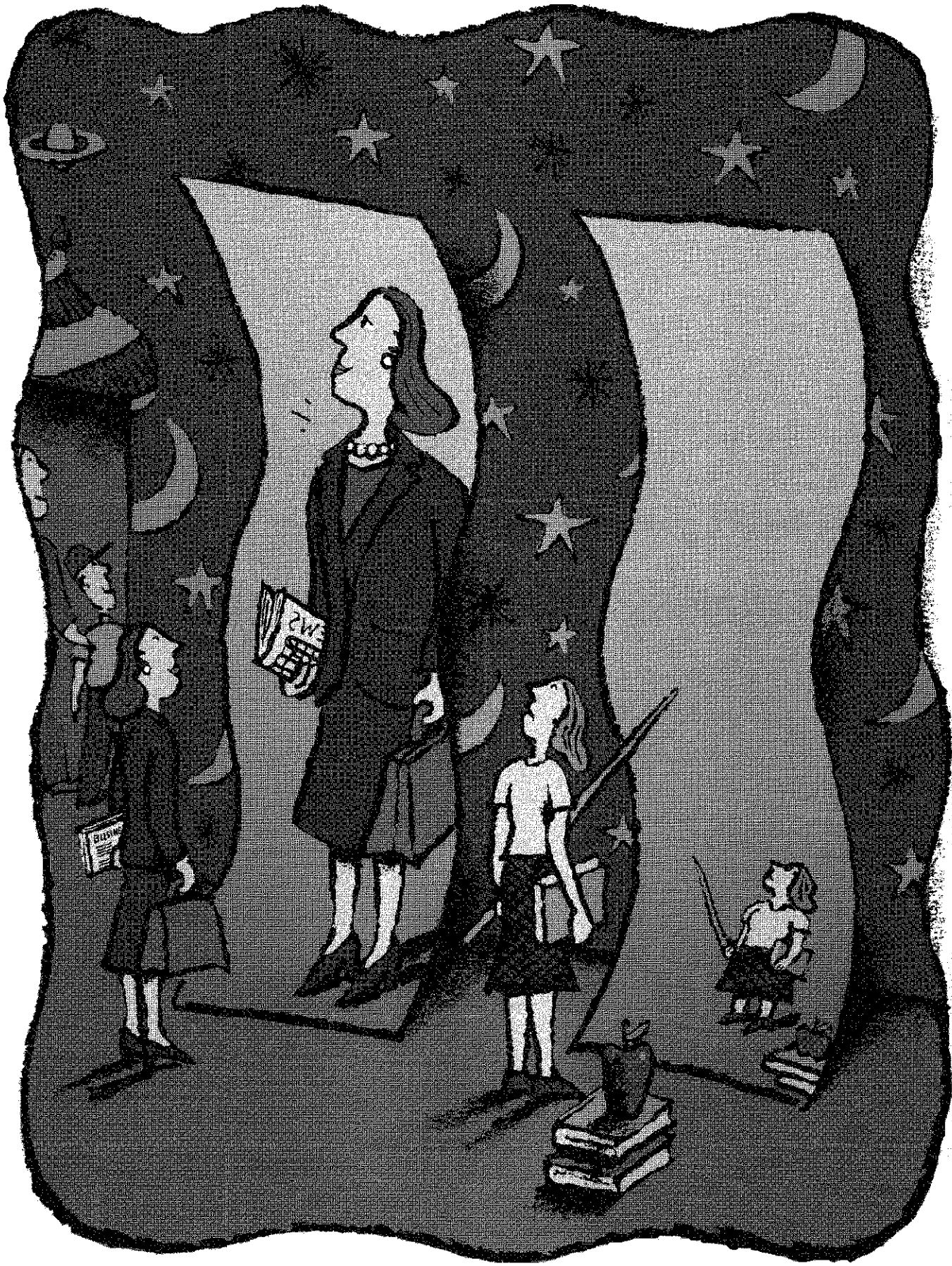

ILLUSTRATION BY DANIEL BAXTER



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# Wage Distortion

## Why America's Top Female College Graduates Aren't Teaching

BY CAROLINE M. HOXBY AND ANDREW LEIGH

Though exceptions undoubtedly exist, women with higher aptitudes can ordinarily be expected to be more effective classroom teachers than those with lower aptitudes. It is therefore troubling to think that in the United States those entering the teaching profession in recent years have, on average, lower measured aptitudes than their predecessors.

That able women are no longer entering the teaching profession at anywhere near the same rate as in the past is of special concern, since women compose approximately 75 percent of all elementary and secondary school teachers, almost the same percentage as 40 years ago.

Yet a decline in female teacher quality is just what the evidence—most notably a recent study by three University of Maryland economists—indisputably shows (see Figure 1). According to their findings, the likelihood that a highly talented female (one ranked among the top 10 percent of all high schoolers) will become a teacher fell from roughly 20 percent in 1964 to just over 11 percent in 2000.

The study gives weight to other signs that the teaching profession no longer attracts exceptional teachers. Dr. Leo Klagholz, a commissioner of education in



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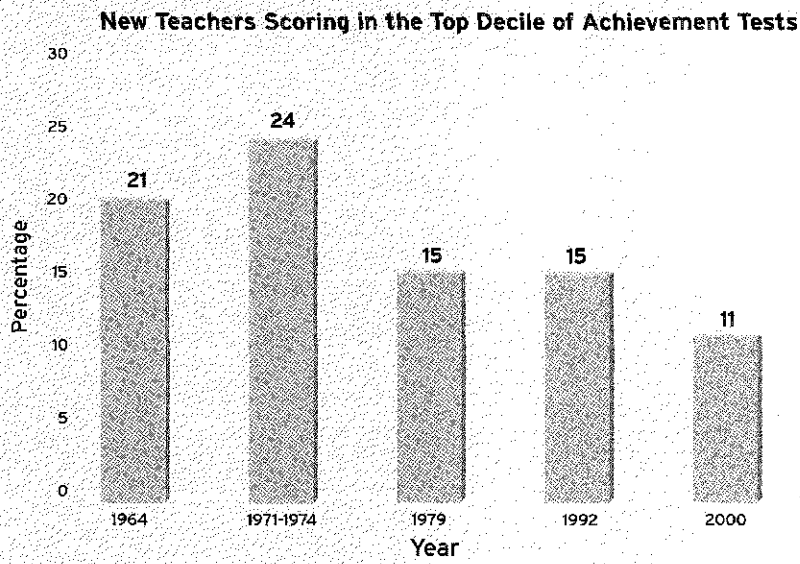
## Losing Talented Teachers (Figure 1)

*As is evident from the percentage of new teachers who scored very well on a high school achievement test, far fewer high-aptitude females are entering the teaching profession.*




**SOURCE:** Sean Corcoran, William Evans, and Robert Schwab, "Changing Labor Market Opportunities for Women and the Quality of Teachers 1957–1992", National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 9180, 2002

New Jersey in the 1990s, surveyed his state's teacher colleges in the 1980s and found that, for prospective teachers, the verbal and math SAT scores, when combined, were lower than 800 out of a possible score of 1,600. Similarly, the Educational Testing Service in 1990 found that those expressing an intention to become a teacher scored near the bottom among those taking the test. In 1998, Eugene Hickok, then Pennsylvania's secretary of education, revealed that his state's teacher preparation system provided "limited assurances of competence and quality," leaving "the doors…open for C-plus students (or worse) to become teachers."

The icing on the anecdotal cake came in the summer of 2003 with news that a Massachusetts superintendent of education, Wilfredo Laboy, had failed—for the third year in a row—a literacy test that the state's high school seniors needed to pass in order to graduate. The exam Laboy failed has been part of a series of tests required of new Massachusetts teachers since 1998. It was also big news when aspiring teachers took the tests for the first time: almost 60 percent of them flunked. Paul Reville, director of the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy at MassINC, a nonpartisan think tank in Boston, reviewed many of the written responses from those who failed and bemoaned the high number of the commonwealth's teachers "who were college graduates and yet couldn't string a sentence together."

## What Accounts for the Decline in Teacher Quality?

The factors contributing to the reduced likelihood that women of high aptitude will enter the teaching profession appear to come from both within and outside the teaching profession. We focus on two that can be expected to be of critical significance.

First, within the teaching profession, the pay scale of public school teachers has become increasingly compressed since the 1960s. The salary distribution has narrowed so that those with the highest aptitude earn no more than those with the lowest. This may have pushed able women out of the field of education.

Second, outside of teaching, college-educated women have achieved greater parity in their pay vis-à-vis male workers, luring more able women to alternative professions. High-aptitude women may have pulled away from education in order to take special advantage of the new opportunities.

While there could be other explanations outside our investigation, conventional wisdom has long pointed to new opportunities for college-educated women as the primary explanation for the change in teacher quality that many have sensed. We were inclined to accept the conventional wisdom when we began this project, but, after systematically comparing the relative importance of the two factors, we found, surprisingly enough, that pay compression within the teaching profession, induced by the introduction of collective bargaining, has had by far the greater effect.

On further reflection, we were not quite so surprised by the results. For one thing, the overall timing of the decline in teacher quality corresponds to the rise of collective bargaining within education. Teacher unions won collective bargaining rights in key cities and states during the 1960s. Over the next 20 years, collective bargaining spread from state to state across the country.

As a result of union action, the average salary for teachers increased modestly. But as the average was edging upward, the range of the scale narrowed sharply, so much so that able young women were bound to take notice. Moreover, collectively bargained contracts placed a premium on characteristics such as seniority and credentials rather than performance, further depressing the opportunities for the high-aptitude teacher.

## Our Approach

Women may enter teaching for any number of reasons, some of which are obviously intangible. We began our study by making the standard economic assumption that a woman's decision to



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# union-driven pay compression accounts for more than three-quarters of the decline in teacher quality

teach is influenced in part by her expected pay within teaching and her expected pay in other occupations. We then subdivided each of these expectations, developing four components that affect the occupational choices of female college graduates:

1. the average pay of all teachers;
2. the differences between the average pay of all teachers and those having a particular aptitude (a measure of pay compression);
3. for all other occupations, the average pay for men with particular aptitudes (what might be considered the base pay for that occupation);
4. for all other occupations, the difference between this base pay for men with a particular aptitude and the pay received by women with comparable aptitudes (pay parity).

Although compression of pay within teaching and improved parity with pay for women in other occupations occurred simultaneously over the past 40 years, we were able to distinguish their independent effects, because the timing of their impact varied considerably from one state to the next. For example, parity of pay for women improved sooner in some states than in others. Since we had data, by state, on the earnings of men and women who graduated from college in the same year, we could estimate the independent impact of pay parity separately for each state by calculating the ratio of female-to-male earnings of nonteachers who graduated from similar colleges at the same time.

The rate of change in the degree of wage compression due to union influences also varied from one state to the next. For instance, while teachers in states like Michigan, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island were heavily unionized by the early 1960s, collective bargaining spread more slowly in other states—especially in the South. These differences were largely due to differences in state laws relating to collective bargaining for public-sector workers.

Unionization and the introduction of collective bargaining can be expected to increase average pay for all teachers but reduce the difference between average pay and the pay received by those with both high and low aptitudes, thereby discouraging entry into teaching by women with higher aptitude while attracting those with lower aptitudes. While other forces may also affect the wage spread, we have isolated statistically the portion that was caused by unionization and collective bargaining. To do so, we relied on six indicators of state laws that facilitated or forestalled unionization of teachers. From 1955 onward, states gradually enacted laws that gave teachers' organizations the rights to meet and confer with management, to conduct collective bargaining, to deduct members' dues and nonmembers' fees from paychecks, and to exclude nonmembers from teaching. Other states enacted laws that protected nonmembers' right to work or prohibited paycheck deduction of dues and fees.

Other research shows that changes in these laws caused the pace of teachers' unionization to vary considerably, even among states with very similar labor markets such as Ohio and Illinois. By restricting our analysis to changes in unionization that were associated with changes in state laws, we can be confident that we are identifying the effect on pay compression of unionization alone.

## The Data

We limit our analysis to college graduates, since a college degree was required for almost all beginning teachers during the 40-year period of our study. The data come from a series of surveys conducted by the federal government for various years between 1961 and 1997. For the college graduating classes of 1975, 1977, 1980, 1984, 1986, and 1990, we relied on the surveys of Recent College Graduates (RCG), compiled by the U.S. Office of Education (later the Department of Education). For information on the classes of 1961 and 1964 to 1967, we relied on two predecessors of the RCG surveys (College Graduates of the Class of 1961 and Project Talent), and two successors to the RCG surveys (Baccalaureate and Beyond and the National Education Longitudinal Study) provide information for the classes of 1993 and 1997.

The surveys contained information, for most states, on the college from which a woman graduated, her first occupation, and her earnings around one to three years after graduation. Unfortunately, the surveys did not collect direct information on a woman's aptitude. However, we were able to obtain information on the average aptitude of all students at the college she attended.

We divide the individuals from each annual cohort of college graduates into six groups according to the type of school attended: 1) highly selective colleges, where average student SAT scores were in the top 5 percentiles; 2) quite selective colleges, in the next 10 percentiles; 3) moderately selective colleges, in the next 15 percentiles; 4) above-average colleges, in the next 20 percentiles; 5) below-average colleges, in the next 25 percentiles; and 6) bottom-tier colleges, in the lowest 25 percentiles.

Organizing in this way gave us a direct measure of the extent to which teachers are being trained at more or less selective colleges, itself a question of considerable interest. The measure also provides an accurate estimate of the change



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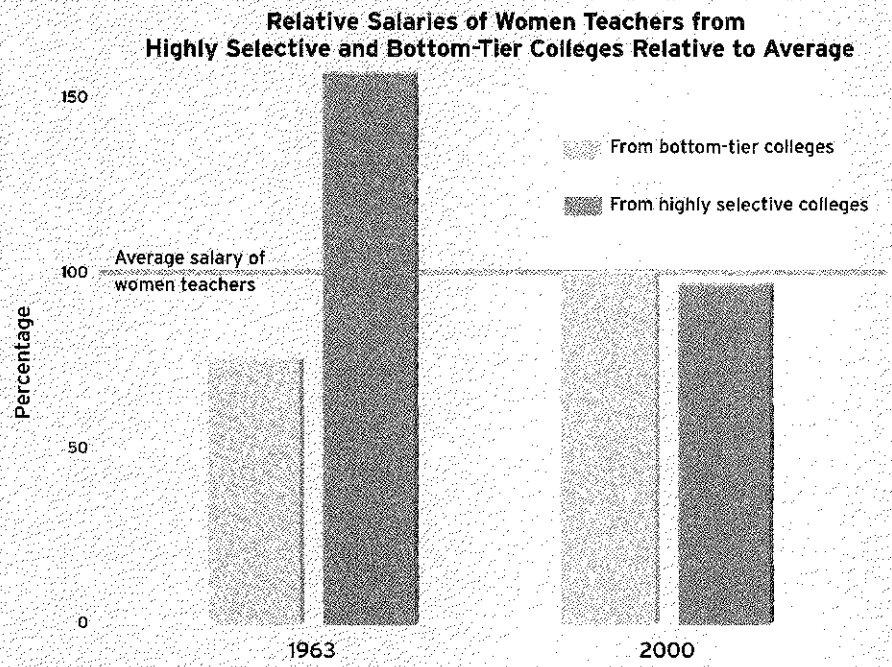
## Big Push (Figure 2)

*In 1963 the average salary of women teachers from highly selective colleges was much higher than the salary received by women teachers from bottom-tier colleges. By the year 2000 the two groups were earning about the same.*




SOURCE: Authors' calculations

in the aptitude of entering teachers, provided that their average aptitude relative to the average aptitude of all students has not changed within each of these six categories over time. That is, if the average teacher's SAT score at highly selective colleges is consistently 50 points lower (or higher) than that of the average student at such colleges, and a similar consistency holds for the other groupings, then we have a good measure of changes in the aptitudes of those entering the teaching profession.

### Charting the Decline

The economic news for educators as a whole was fairly good over the approximately 40 years of the study. Our data indicate that, nationwide, the real (inflation-adjusted) earnings of the average new female teacher rose by 8 percent between 1963 and 2000. But this change was not evenly distributed across aptitude groups. The earnings of teachers in the lowest aptitude group (those from the bottom-tier colleges) rose dramatically relative to the average, so that teachers who in 1963 earned 73 percent of the average salary for teachers could expect to earn exactly the average by 2000. Meanwhile, the ratio of the earnings of teachers in the highest-aptitude group (from the highly selective colleges) to earnings of average teachers fell dramatically. In states where they began with an earnings ratio of 157 percent, they ended with a ratio of 98 percent. By 2000, most states had earnings ratios near 100 percent *for all aptitude groups*, indicating that graduates of the most highly selective colleges earned no more as teachers than did graduates from bottom-tier schools! (See Figure 2.)

Opportunities outside of teaching also changed differently for women by ability group, but the differences were far less pronounced. For a college graduate from the selective schools (the top 30 percent), the ratio of female earnings to male earnings in nonteaching occupations rose modestly: A woman could expect her earnings to rise as a percentage of the earnings of males with similar aptitudes from 77 percent in 1963 to 84 percent in 2000. For a woman from the bottom-tier schools, there was little change in the ratio of female earnings to male earnings. A woman could expect her earnings to drop slightly, from 80 to 77 percent, in relation to men with similar aptitude (see Figure 3).

Our data also indicate that the share of new female teachers from highly selective colleges fell from 5 percent to 1 percent between 2000 and 1963. This five-fold drop is a strong indication in our data of the decline in teacher aptitude. Over the same period, the share of new female teachers who came from the bottom-tier colleges rose from 16 to 36 percent (see Figure 4).

### Equal Effects, Unequal Consequences

Factors with equal potential effects can nonetheless have dramatically different consequences if one factor hardly changes while the other shifts significantly. In physics, both pressure and temperature affect volume, but if only temperature changes, that is the force that explains why a kettle whistles when water comes to a boil. As we shall see, much the same can be said about changes in teacher quality in recent decades.

Equal changes in each of the four components listed above had roughly equal effects on the probability that a woman would enter the teaching profession. For example, increases in average teachers' salaries increased the likelihood that a woman



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would become a teacher. Changes in other occupations had a similar effect. When the base occupational wages (for men) within a particular aptitude group increased, then women were attracted out of teaching to other occupations. Also, when women came closer to achieving parity of pay in nonteaching occupations, then teaching became less attractive. A change in any of these factors had roughly the same impact on the decision of women to enter teaching as did a change in the amount of wage compression.

But while an equal change in all factors would have had a roughly similar impact on the chances that women of a particular aptitude would choose to teach, the actual size of the changes over the 40-year period were anything but equal for women from different aptitude groups. While parity of pay for men and women and the base pay for males in other occupations changed similarly for all women regardless of aptitude, the change in union-induced compression of the pay spread for teachers was especially large.

As a result teaching became much more attractive to those with lower aptitudes—and much less attractive to the most talented. Pay compression increased the share of the lowest-aptitude female college graduates who became teachers by about 9 percentage points. Meanwhile, the share of the highest-aptitude graduates who became teachers shifted downward by about 12 percentage points.

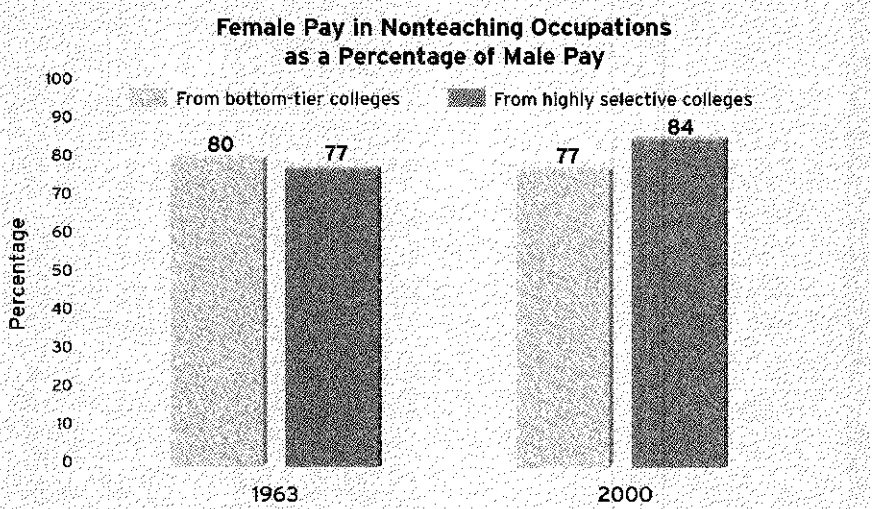
By contrast, the gains in gender equality in other occupations, while significant, were similar for female college graduates of all aptitudes. Thus they had only small differential effects on the occupational choices of talented women college graduates; the fraction of women entering the teaching profession from highly selective colleges fell by only 3.2 percentage points. For all the selective colleges (the top 30 percent), the effect was just 2.5 percentage points. For all those who attended less selective colleges, increasing pay parity had negligible effects.

## Conclusions

The results reported above allow us to estimate how many teachers would have come from each type of college had pay compression

### Little Pull (Figure 3)

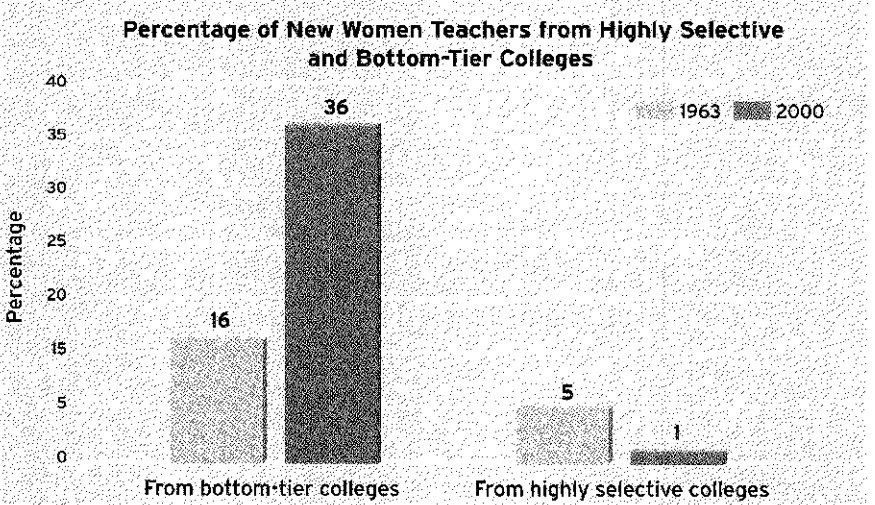
*Between 1963 and 2000, the gender differences in pay outside the teaching profession changed only slightly for those from either highly selective or bottom-tier colleges.*




SOURCE: Authors' calculations

### A Race to the Bottom (Figure 4)

*The share of female teachers who attended highly selective colleges fell dramatically from 1963 to 2000. At the same time, the share that came from bottom-tier colleges more than doubled. By 2000, more than one-third of new female teachers had graduated from a bottom-tier college.*




SOURCE: Authors' calculations



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not intensified and, separately, had pay parity in other occupations not improved. We find that pay compression explains about 80 percent of the decline of teachers from highly selective colleges and about 25 percent of the increase in the share of teachers from the least selective colleges. Meanwhile, changes in pay parity in nonteaching occupations explains only 9 percent of the decline in the share of teachers coming from highly selective colleges—and only 6 percent of the increase in teachers from the bottom tier of colleges. The sheer increase in the proportion of all college graduates coming from these bottom-tier colleges accounts for much of the remaining increment in the percentage of low-aptitude teachers.

These results are striking: union-driven pay compression alone accounts for more than three-quarters of the decline in teacher quality. The finding is best understood by recognizing that pay parity increased only moderately and at a similar rate for college-educated women of all abilities. Not only did the gender gap begin to disappear in such highly paid professions as law and medicine, but it also slipped noticeably in less-exalted occupations such as bookkeeping and middle-level administration.

Put another way, we cannot expect high-performing college graduates to continue to enter teaching if that is the one profession in which pay is decoupled from performance. Indeed, other professions have been *raising* the reward for performance over the past few decades. We suspect that this trend exacerbated the degree to which pay compression pushed high-aptitude people out of teaching. A push from one direction has more effect on someone who is being simultaneously pulled from the other direction.

Our findings, though disturbing, are potentially hopeful. The decline in the quality of those entering teaching is not an irrevocable trend driven by larger forces in the society over which policymakers can exercise little control. On the contrary, education policymakers have the tools within their own hands to address the problem at hand. To attract high-aptitude women back into teaching, school districts need to reward teachers in the same way that college graduates are paid in other professions—that is, according to their performance. In all probability, such a strategy would attract male teachers of higher aptitude as well.

*Caroline M. Hoxby is professor of economics at Harvard University and the director of the Economics of Education Program at the National Bureau of Economic Research.*
*Andrew Leigh is an economist in the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University.*
*The unabridged version of this article is available at www.educationnext.org.*

PEPG Named Partner in First Federally Funded Center on School Choice

Harvard's Program on Education Policy and Governance (PEPG), together with other leading institutions, has established the federally funded Center on School Choice, Competition and Achievement. The center has received a $10 million, five-year grant from the Institute of Education Sciences, the main research component of the U.S. Department of Education.

The Peabody College of Education at Vanderbilt University will provide for the center's primary administrative responsibilities.

For more information about the center and other PEPG-related research and activities, please visit:

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THE PROGRAM ON EDUCATION POLICY AND GOVERNANCE
Paul E. Peterson, Director
The Taubman Center for State and Local Government
John F. Kennedy School of Government
Harvard University
(617) 495-7976
pepg_administrator@ksg.harvard.edu
http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/pepg



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# Incentives to Learn

## Merit Scholarships That Pay Kids to Do Well

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**Proposals** for education reform generally focus on teachers and curricula. But the most important factor in education may be the student himself or herself. A growing number of states, including Georgia, Michigan, New York, and Massachusetts, have established programs that provide financial rewards in the form of merit scholarships for college for students who perform well academically. However, such programs are controversial with some educators, and the structure of many existing programs in the United States makes it difficult to evaluate rigorously the impact of such incentive programs because it is hard to identify for comparison a credible group of students who were not eligible for the program. Examining the experiences of programs outside the United States may well be informative in helping to understand the impact of incentives for students.

BY MICHAEL KREMER, EDWARD MIGUEL, AND REBECCA THORNTON



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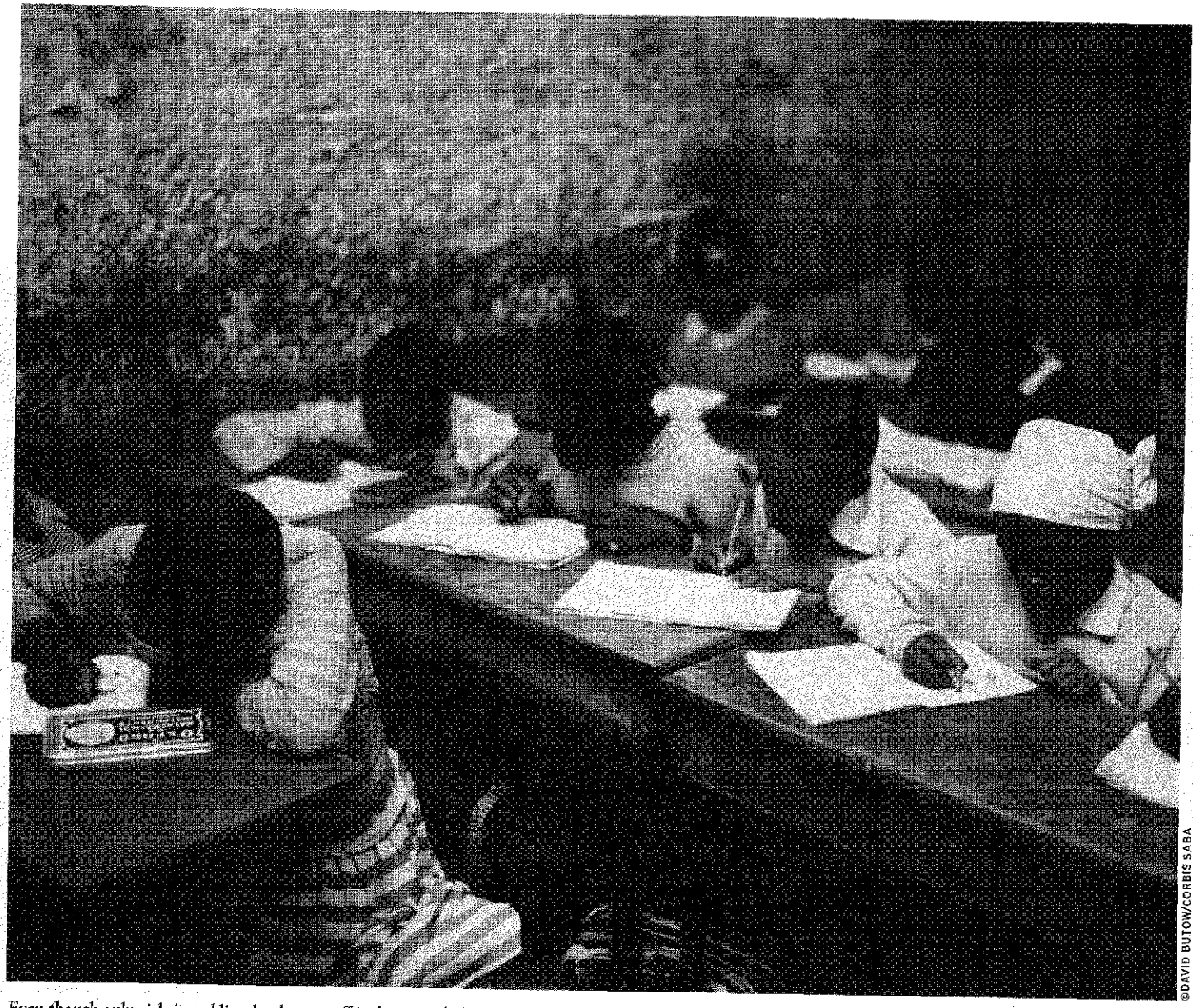

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*Even though only girls in public schools were offered merit scholarships (covering the cost of a year's worth of school fees), both boys' and girls' test scores improved.*

We collected evidence from a program in Kenya, in which girls in public schools who performed well were offered merit scholarships that covered the cost of the fees charged by public schools at the time. Their families were offered grants to help cover the cost of school supplies. The program was implemented by a nonprofit organization, which phased it into a number of schools in random order, allowing us to compare schools that were eligible for the program with other schools where the program had not yet been introduced. The results of our evaluation, conducted in 2001 and 2002, indicate that the program significantly improved the test scores of girls. Moreover, the program had salutary spillover effects: test scores of students who were not eligible for—or had no hope of earning—the award also improved, as did school attendance for both students and teachers.

## A Deficit of Data on Merit Scholarships

Prior to our study, we had little information on the value of using scholarships as incentives to learn. One of the few existing sources of evidence in the United States is Georgia's HOPE (Helping Outstanding Pupils Educationally) scholarship program, which awards college scholarships to high school students who graduate with at least a B average and attend college in-state. After the program was introduced in 1993, the average SAT score for the Peach State's high school



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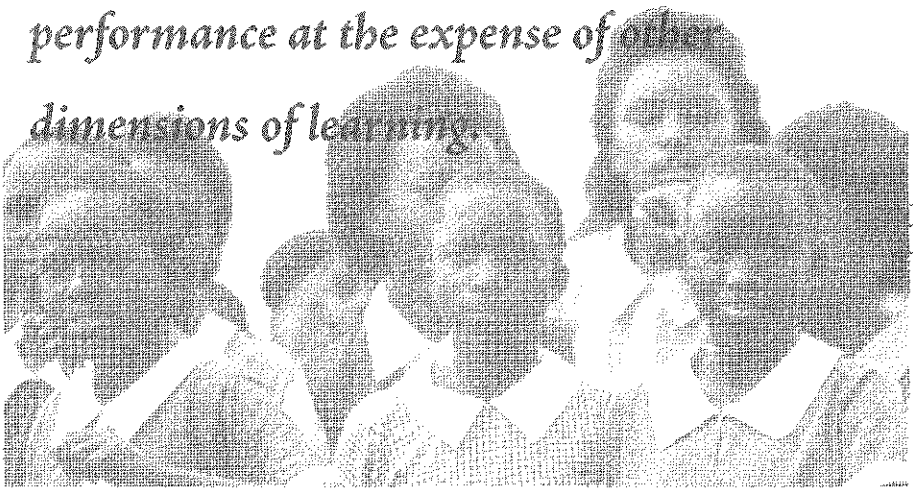
seniors rose almost 40 points. But since all students in the state were eligible, there was no way of determining, with a reliable degree of certainty, whether factors other than the scholarship had also contributed to the outcomes.

Outside the United States, a randomized study among high school students in Israel conducted by economists Joshua Angrist of MIT and Victor Lavy of Hebrew University found that students eligible for cash awards for good performance were 6 to 8 percentage points more likely to pass their matriculation exams than other students in the same school.

The opportunity to evaluate the Kenyan program has enabled us to address many of the problems of earlier research on merit scholarships. Because the schools participating in the Kenyan scholarship program were randomly selected, we could credibly identify its effects. We were also able to collect data on student and teacher attendance, purchases of school supplies, students' use of time, and a range of student attitudes about school that allowed us to explore the mechanisms by which merit scholarships affect schooling. Finally, as this same region in Kenya has been the site of randomized evaluations of several other education interventions, we can compare the cost-effectiveness of the scholarship program with alternative programs such as those that provide textbooks to students or performance-based incentives for teachers.

Remarkably, we found little evidence to support the common criticisms of merit scholarships. The Kenyan program, for instance, did not appear to have led students to focus on test performance at the expense of other dimensions of learning. We also found no evidence that incentives led to better performance only during the time frame of the program, as might be expected if the improvements were due to cramming for—or cheating on—the exam; in fact, test score gains remained large in the year following the competition, and there was no increase in the frequency of extra "prep" sessions before tests. And in our surveys of students, we found no evidence that external rewards interfere with a student's motivation to learn.

*The Kenyan program did not appear to have led students to focus on test performance at the expense of other dimensions of learning.*



## History, Math, Science, and Swahili

Like the United States, the Kenyan educational system includes eight years of primary and four years of secondary school. Though nominally free, various fees have, historically, created financial barriers to education in Kenya, as in many other developing countries. (Kenya recently abolished these fees for primary school, but at the time our evaluation was conducted, they were still in place.) Thus, while approximately 85 percent of children of primary school age in western Kenya, where our study was conducted, enrolled in school, only about one-third of all Kenyan children finished 8th grade; and only a fraction of these students enter secondary school. Because of the few slots available, getting a place at a good high school (and even, to some extent, getting a place at any high school) depends on performance on the government's Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) exam taken in grade 8. In preparation for the KCPE, students in grades 4–8 typically take standardized exams at the end of each school year. These tests—in English, geography and history, mathematics, science, and Swahili—are often the difference between moving on or not. More troublesome for many families: students have to pay to take the exams and to cover the cost of school supplies such as textbooks, writing materials, and the uniforms required in Kenyan schools.

Thus, when a Dutch-funded Kenyan nonprofit, International Child Support (ICS) Africa, launched a program to pay school fees for girls who scored in the top 15 percent of year-end grade 6 exams, we realized it was a wonderful opportunity to study the effects of such payments on academic achievement. The payment to the family to help cover the cost of uniforms, textbooks, writing supplies, and other school expenses, was US$12.80, a substantial amount in a region with a per capita income of only about US$350 per year. The amount set aside to pay for school fees was about US$6.50.

In March 2001, ICS Africa randomly invited half of an initial sample of 127 primary schools to participate in the Girls Scholarship Program. Each of the schools was located in one of two rural districts, Busia or Teso, in Kenya's populated and fertile western region just north of Lake Victoria. Both districts, which cover an area about half the size of Rhode Island (more than 700 square miles), have similar asset and income profiles. In fact, they were part of the same school district until 1995. But they are very different. Busia's 370,600 people are mainly



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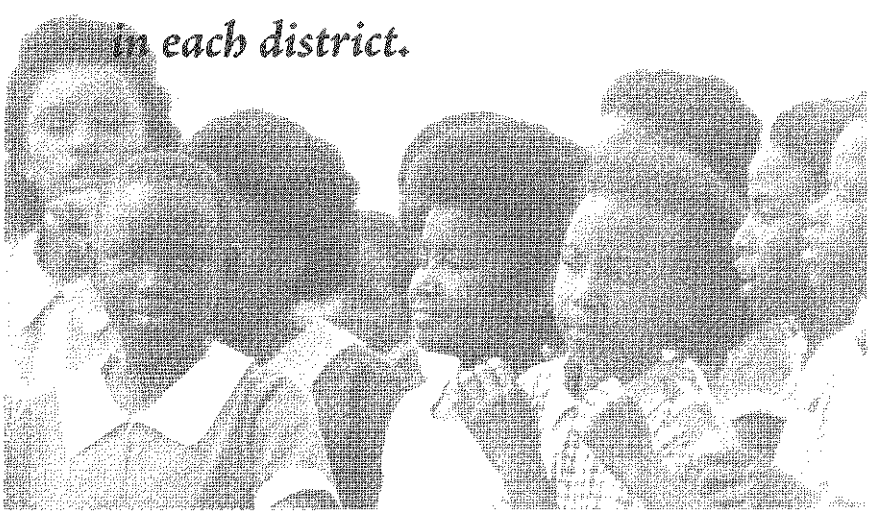
from a Bantu-speaking ethnic group, the Luhya, who have agricultural traditions. Teso's 192,700 people are primarily a Nilotic-speaking group, the Teso, with nomadic cattle- and goat-herding traditions. Indigenous religious beliefs and traditional taboos remain stronger in Teso than in Busia. Historically, Tesos have been educationally disadvantaged relative to the Luhya, and our survey data confirms this disparity: parents of students in Teso district have on average 0.4 years less schooling than Busia district parents.

These differences in language, history, and customs created some challenges for the program. The first came in the form of a lightning strike on the Korisai public school in Teso just as the scholarship program was being introduced. The lightning killed 7 students, injured 27, and severely damaged the school. Secondly, though Korisai was not part of the ICS Africa scholarship program, local suspicions of ICS, which was headquartered in Busia and employed mostly members of the Luhya ethnic group, did contribute to the withdrawal of 5 of the original 58 sample schools in the Teso district, as well as 1 nearby Busia school. Three of the six were "program schools" (where scholarships were offered), and three were in the comparison group.

Five additional schools—three in Teso and two in Busia—had incomplete exam scores for 2000, 2001, or 2002 and were also dropped from the evaluation, leaving 116 schools and 7,258 students in the final study sample. Overall, 51 percent of the students in our final sample were from program schools.

*ICS Africa awarded scholarships to the highest-scoring 15 percent of grade 6 girls in the program schools in each district.*



The scholarship program provided high-scoring grade 6 girls in participating schools with an award for the following two academic years—that is, for grades 7 and 8, through the end of primary school. In each of those years, the award comprised a grant of US$6.40, paid to the girl's school to cover fees; a grant of US$12.80 for school supplies, paid directly to the girl's family; and public recognition at a school awards assembly. Although there was no way to guarantee that parents spent the award money on school supplies, the fact that the money was presented to parents in a public ceremony is likely to have created community pressure on them to use the money in ways that benefited their daughter's education.

As mentioned, ICS Africa awarded scholarships to the highest-scoring 15 percent of grade 6 girls in the program schools in each district, based on a student's total score across the five subjects tested. The competition for scholarships therefore took place across a large number of schools and among a large number of students, not within individual schools with a fixed number of winners in each—making it less likely that the program would undermine cooperation between students within schools and classrooms. Some 57 percent of program schools (36 of 63 schools) had at least one winner in 2001 (the first year of the program), with an average of 5.6 winners in each of those schools. ICS Africa then held school assemblies—for students, parents, teachers, and local government officials—in January 2002 to announce and publicly recognize the 2001 winners. In the second round of the scholarship competition in 2002, 70 percent of the program schools (44 of 63 schools) had at least one winner. All told, 78 percent of program schools had at least one winner in either 2001 or 2002.

As expected, scholarship winners came from somewhat more advantaged families than the other students in the sample. Parents of scholarship winners, for example, had nearly three years more schooling than nonwinners (7.7 years versus 4.8 years). However, there was no notable difference between winners and nonwinners in household ownership of iron roofs or latrines, important household assets in this area.

During unannounced attendance checks in 2002, ICS Africa personnel administered questionnaires to students in grades 5–7, collecting information on school attendance, study effort, habits, and attitudes toward school. There were four such attendance checks in each school each year. We did not use attendance data from official school registers, which are often unreliable in less-developed countries like Kenya. The surveys confirmed that nearly 90 percent of eligible girls had heard of the scholarship and that the vast majority of boys correctly knew that they were *ineligible* for scholarships.



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## Test Score Impacts

Because the schools participating in the Girls Scholarship Program were chosen at random, we can reliably gauge the program's impact by comparing their students' test scores in 2001 and 2002 to those of students in the comparison schools. We make these comparisons using two different samples of students: those in 6th grade in 2001 and those in 6th grade in 2002. For the former sample, we can use data from end-of-year grade 5 exams in 2000—the year before the program was launched—to control for differences in performance at baseline. For the latter, we rely instead on the average test scores in their school in 2000, since individual data were not available for all these students.

We looked at the combined sample in both districts for children in grade 6 in 2001, finding that the scholarship program raised test scores significantly, by 0.12 standard deviations on average, in 2001 and 2002. Surprisingly, there was no statistically significant difference in the effect of the program on girls and its effect on boys, indicating that the program also indirectly benefited students who were not eligible for the scholarships. The pattern of effects differed dramatically, however, between Busia and Teso. The average program impact for students in Busia was a remarkable 0.19 standard deviations, while the program had no impact whatsoever on students in Teso. A gain of 0.1 standard deviation corresponds to moving from the 50th to 54th percentile of the distribution of test scores.

The effects on the test scores of students from both grades are quite similar, with positive effects of the program in Busia and none in Teso. Within this larger sample of students, however, the improvements registered by girls were roughly twice as large as those of the boys (see Figure 1).

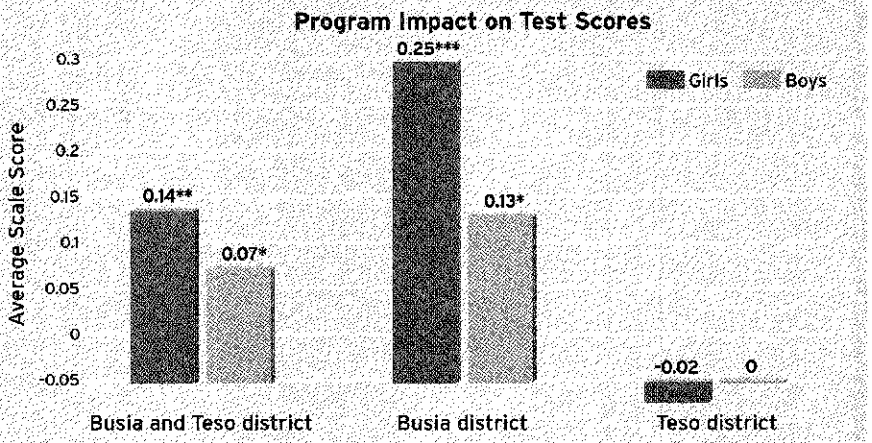
Why the differences in results across the two districts? Through subsequent interviews with a representative sample of 64 teachers in 18 program schools, we learned of stark differences in the reception of the program across Busia and Teso, perhaps in part due to the lightning strike. For instance, when teachers were asked to rate local parental support for the program, 90 percent of the Busia teachers claimed that parents were either "very positive" or "somewhat positive" toward the scholarship program, but the analogous rate in Teso was only 58 percent. And one girl in Teso who won the ICS scholarship in 2001 actually refused to accept the reward.

Patterns of attrition from the study make determining the impact of the program difficult in Teso. Not only did fewer students in program schools than in comparison schools take the 2001 exam in Teso (53 percent versus 65 percent, respectively), but the students who were tested in program schools had lower initial (baseline) test scores on average than did the tested students in comparison schools. These differences likely led us to underestimate the effect of the program in Teso. In Busia, by contrast, attrition from the sample was much lower overall and was evenly balanced between treatment and control groups. In the following analysis, we therefore focus entirely on students from Busia district, where we are more confident that our results capture the program's actual effects.

The effects were large and persistent. When the Busia students were in grade 7, those participating in the scholarship program scored roughly 0.2 grades higher than those not eligible to participate. As expected, girls just below the winning threshold showed the largest test-score gains. But there are also marked gains among girls with low initial scores, again indicating the spillover benefits of the program, since girls with low scores had little chance of winning. Busia boys showed similar patterns, although gains at the top of the baseline test distribution are somewhat more pronounced for boys than for girls.

**Learning Payoff** (Figure 1)

*The Girls Scholarship Program boosted the test scores of girls and boys in participating Kenyan schools, even though only girls were eligible for the cash awards. The gains occurred only in Busia, where the program was implemented more smoothly. In Teso, where a lightning strike led several participating schools to withdraw, the program had no impact on student performance.*




*Significant at the 10 percent level
**Significant at the 5 percent level
***Significant at the 1 percent level

NOTE: This sample includes students who were registered in grade 6 (cohort 1) or grade 5 (cohort 2) in January 2001, in schools that did not pull out of the program, for whom we have mean school test-score data in 2000, and who took the test in 2001 or 2002. When computing the program impact on test scores, we controlled for the mean school test score in 2000.

SOURCE: Authors' calculations



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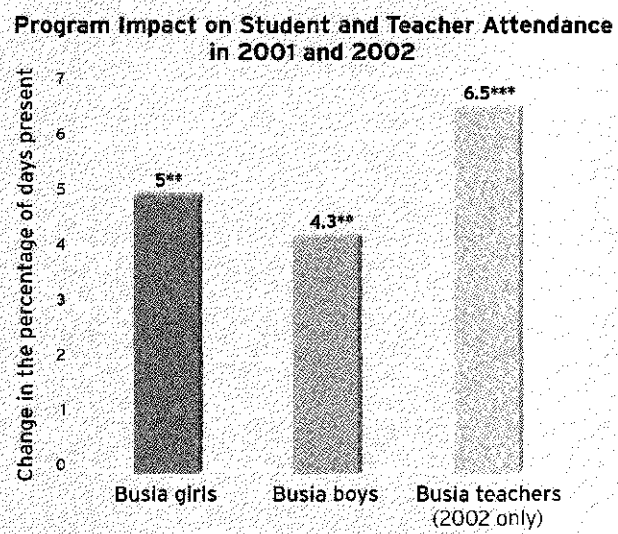
## Added Benefits (Figure 2)

*In Busia, where test score gains were identified, the program increased school attendance among both girls and boys—and teachers.*

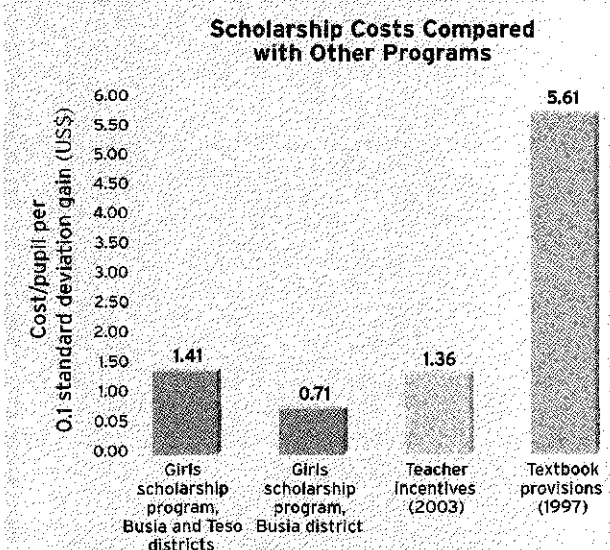



** Significant at the 5 percent level
*** Significant at the 1 percent level

SOURCE: Authors' calculations

## Money Talks—Louder (Figure 3)

*Judging from the results in Busia, the cost-effectiveness of the program compares favorably with that of other interventions that sought to raise student achievement in Kenya.*




SOURCE: Authors' calculations

The performance differences between students in program and comparison schools continued into 2002, despite the fact that the original cohort of girls was now in 7th grade and no longer competing for a scholarship. This persistence suggests that the test score gains were not due to cramming or cheating, but the result of lasting learning effects of the program.

### Collateral Advantages

It is also useful to explore potential channels for test-score gains due to the cash incentives, since some behavioral changes, such as increased coaching or cramming, might raise test scores without improving actual learning.

Perhaps the most interesting finding in this regard was that the scholarship program increased student attendance by as much as 5 percentage points for both girls and boys in Busia, as measured by the unannounced visits in 2001 and 2002—a reduction in absenteeism of almost one-third (see Figure 2). The improvements in attendance were evenly distributed across the school year, so there is no evidence that gains were due to cramming in the run-up to exams.

The large attendance gains for boys in Busia immediately suggest that increases in effort were not simply investments made to increase the chance of winning an award. So too the increased attendance among program-school girls with low initial test scores—indicating little chance of winning an award.

Indirect impacts seem almost as important as direct ones. For example, absentee rates among teachers in Busia also fell—by more than 6 percentage points, or roughly one-third, an effect as large as the attendance gain among students. This finding provides a plausible explanation for the positive ancillary benefits experienced by boys in Busia program schools, namely greater teacher effort directed to the class as a whole.

We found no evidence of the adverse changes in students' attitudes that some psychologists warn will result from using material rewards to encourage learning. We asked students a series of eight questions centered on the subject of how much they liked a school activity—doing homework, for instance—relative to a nonschool activity, such as fetching water or playing sports. Overall, students preferred the school activity 72 percent of the time, with no statistically significant differences between program and comparison schools or between girls and boys. This suggests that external incentives did not dampen students' intrinsic motivation to learn.

Finally, when we compared the cost-effectiveness of six primary school interventions that had recently been evaluated in the Kenyan study area—the merit scholarship program that is the focus of this paper, a teacher incentive program, a textbook provision program, a flip-chart program, a deworming program, and a child sponsorship program that provided a range of education resources, including free uniforms—we



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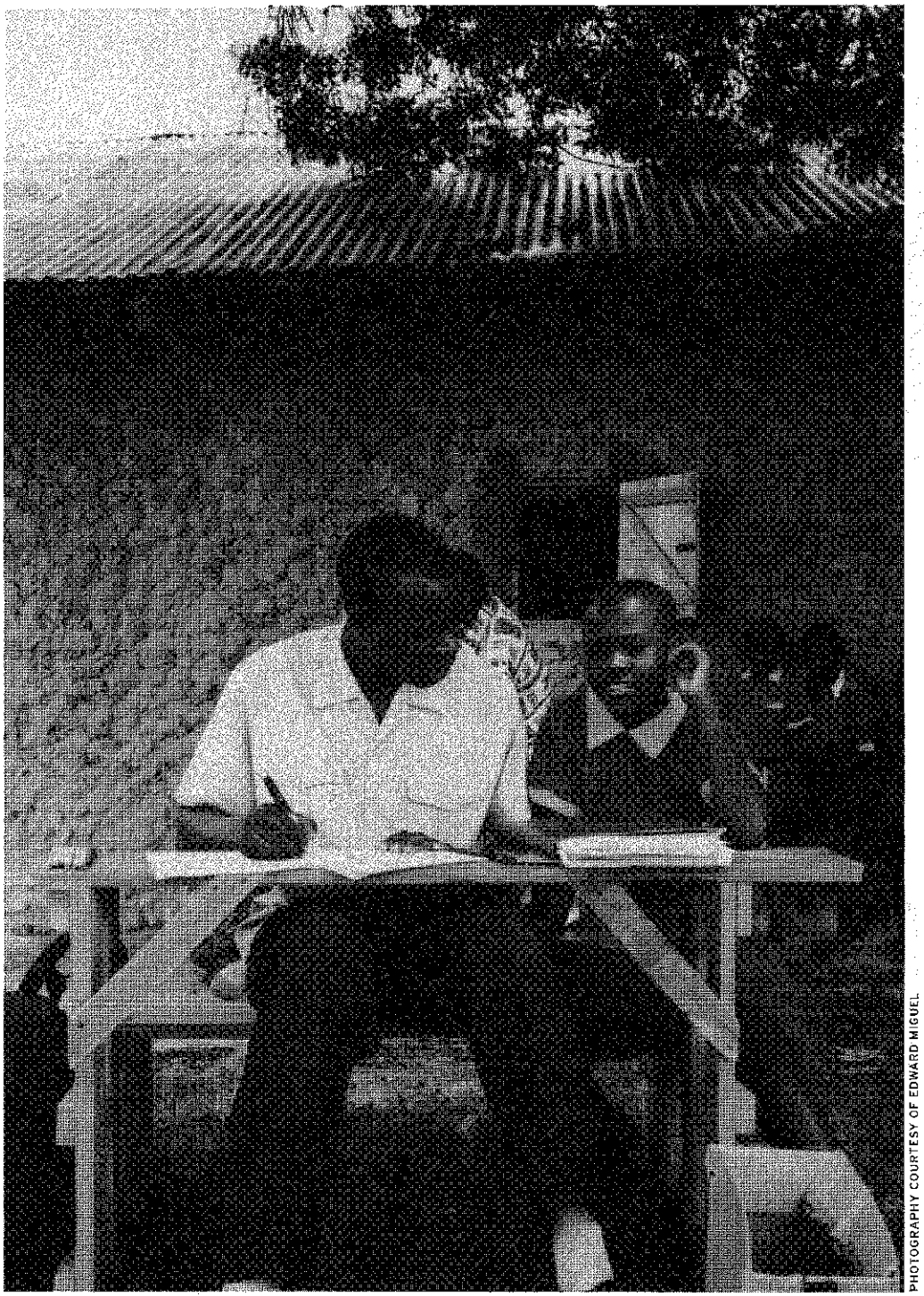
found that cash incentives were a highly cost-effective way to improve both test scores and attendance.

The average test-score gain in merit scholarship program schools, for both female and male students in Busia and Teso districts, in both years of the program, was roughly 0.12 standard deviations, while the comparable gains for schools participating in the teacher incentive program over two years was just 0.07 standard deviations, and for textbook program schools the average gain was only 0.04 standard deviations. (The deworming, flipchart, and child sponsorship programs did not produce statistically significant effects on test scores.)

As to the per pupil cost of increasing test scores by 0.1 standard deviation, the Girls Scholarship Program cost wasUS$1.41, while the teacher incentive program cost US$1.36. Costs of raising scores using the textbook program, however, were much higher, at US$5.61. (See Figure 3.) In Busia, where the girls' scholarship program was well received, the per pupil cost of the program fell to US$0.75, making student merit awards a much more cost-effective way to boost student scores than all the other programs. Though the provision of inexpensive deworming medicine proved by far the most cost-effective way of increasing student attendance—US$3.50 per additional year of school participation compared with US$90 for the Girls Scholarship Program—merit scholarships were the second most cost-effective way of improving attendance.



PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF EDWARD MIGUEL

## Winning Margins

While merit-based scholarships have historically played an important part of the education finance system in many countries, we never knew if—or how—they worked. Evidence from Kenya now suggests that such programs can induce extra effort to raise test scores. Moreover, the benefits seem to spill over to ineligible students and to encourage more effort by teachers as well. All this suggests that boosting study effort among students improves the learning environment in the classroom.

A common reservation about merit-based scholarships is the possibility of adverse equity effects, and it is likely that



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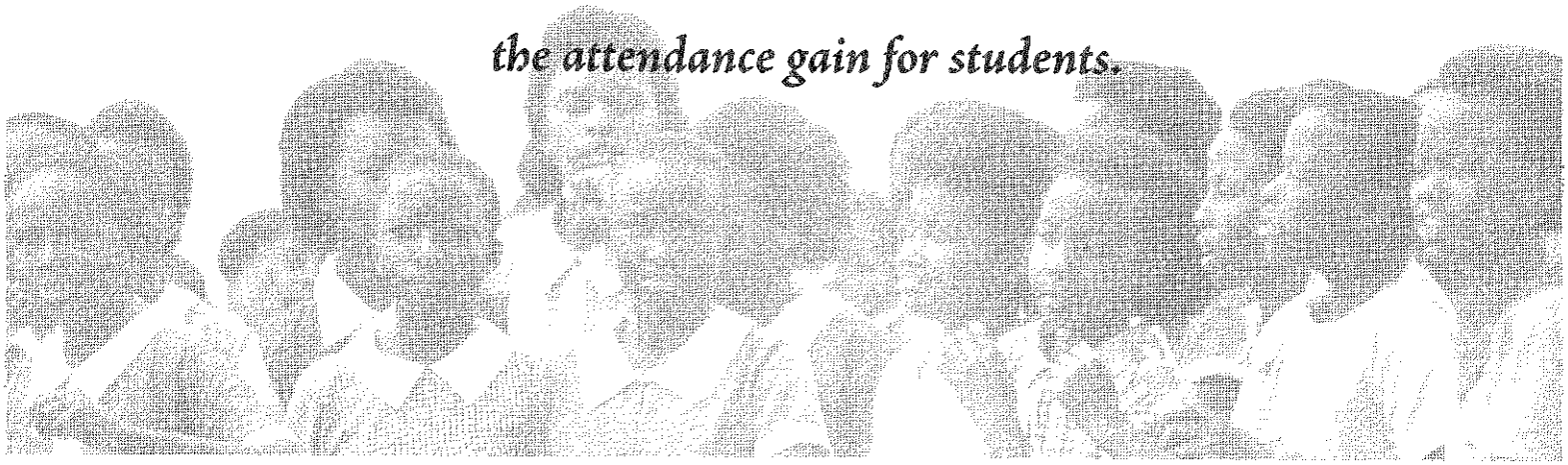
*Absentee rates among teachers fell by roughly a third, an effect as large as the attendance gain for students.*



advantaged students, specifically those whose parents had more schooling, benefited most from the program we studied. Still, groups with little chance at winning an award, including girls with low initial test scores, gained enough academically from the merit scholarship program to make it cost-effective for them, too.

One way to spread the benefits of merit scholarships even more widely would be to restrict the scholarship competition to needy schools, regions, or populations, or, alternatively, to conduct multiple competitions, each restricted to a small geographic area. For instance, if each Kenyan location (a small administrative unit) awarded merit scholarships to its residents independently of other locations, children would compete only against others who live in the same area, where many households live in broadly comparable socioeconomic conditions. This would allow children even in disadvantaged areas to have a reasonable shot at an award. To the extent that such a policy would put more students near the margin of winning a scholarship, it would presumably generate greater incentive effects and spillover benefits like those we found.

The important lesson from Kenya, though, is that while most education research focuses on the effect of material inputs such as class size or of school organization on student outcomes, this work suggests that the most important input in the education production function may very well be the study effort on the part of the child—effort that may be significantly enhanced by the promise of material rewards.

*Michael Kremer is professor, department of economics, Harvard University.*
*Edward Miguel is assistant professor, department of economics, University of California, Berkeley.*
*Rebecca Thornton is a Ph.D. candidate in the department of economics, Harvard University.*
*The unabridged version of this article may be found at www.educationnext.org.*

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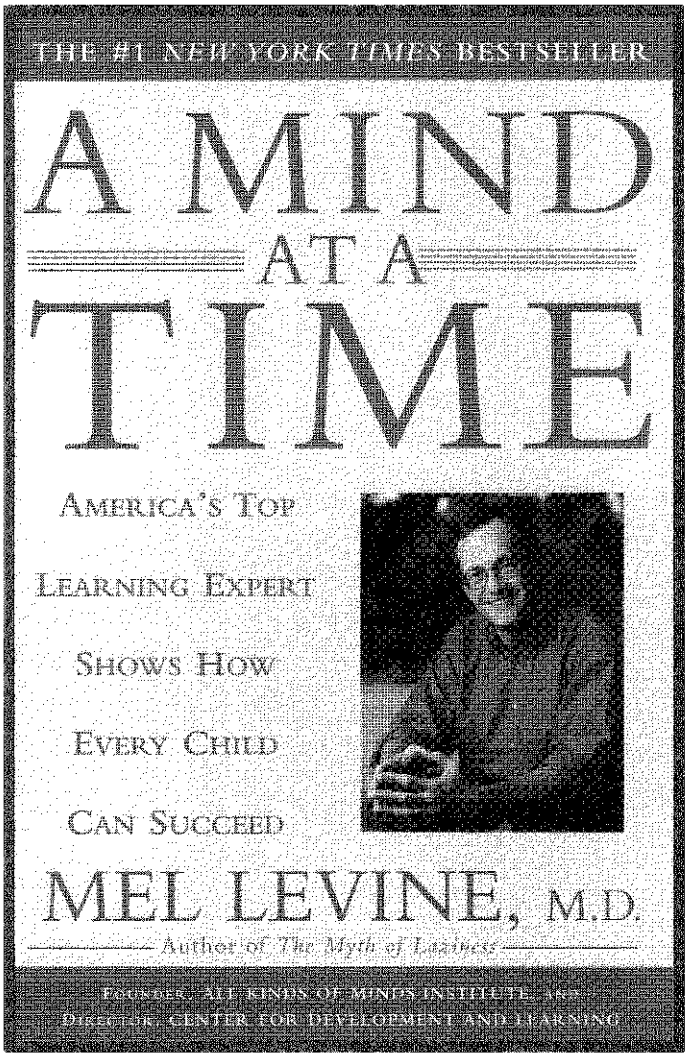
# Mind over Matter

## *A Popular Pediatrician Stretches a Synapse or Two*

*Checked:*
*The Myth of Laziness*
*(Simon & Schuster, 2003)*
*A Mind at a Time*
*(Simon & Schuster, 2002)*

**By Mel Levine**

*Checked by Daniel T. Willingham*


THE #1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER
A MIND AT A TIME
AMERICA'S TOP LEARNING EXPERT SHOWS HOW EVERY CHILD CAN SUCCEED
MEL LEVINE, M.D.
Author of The Myth of Laziness
FOUNDER, ALL KINDS OF MINDS INSTITUTE
DIRECTOR, CENTER FOR DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING

Mel Levine writes about learning disabilities in a way that sometimes invites satire. The premise of his 2003 book, *The Myth of Laziness*, for example, is that a child who appears lazy probably doesn't lack motivation, but rather suffers from "output failure." It is tempting to have a good laugh and say, "Where were you when I was in school, Doc?"

But writing Levine off as a gooey, feel-good lightweight will not do. Indeed, Levine, a professor of pediatrics at the University of North Carolina Medical School and director of UNC's Clinical Center for the Study of Development and Learning, is that rare author whose work affects not only millions of parents, but hundreds of school systems as well. While *The Myth of Laziness* had some success, his 2002 book, *A Mind at a Time*, reached #1 on the *New York Times* best-seller list and brought coverage by the national media, including (every publisher's happiest hope) an appearance on *Oprah*. And in 2005, Levine added a third work, *Ready or Not, Here Life Comes*, which tackles the transition from adolescence to adulthood. By this time, his second book's success had already given a significant boost to All Kinds of Minds, a nonprofit organization Levine cofounded in 1995 to promote his theories. A subsidiary program, Schools Attuned, trains teachers to recognize and address learning problems in children. So far eight training centers have been set up in North America.

Levine's project got a push when state legislatures in North Carolina and Oklahoma allocated funds allowing any public school K–12 teacher to attend the course with substantial or complete remission of the $1,500 tuition. Then in May 2004, the New York City Department of Education signed a five-year contract with All Kinds of Minds worth about $12.5 million to train 20,000 city teachers. By the time *60 Minutes* aired a story on the children of baby boomers last fall, Levine was called "one of the foremost authorities in the country on how children learn."

There are two questions that parents and educators should ask about Levine's program. First, Is his theory of how the mind works correct? Theories of learning disabilities (including Levine's) are theories of what happens when learning abilities have gone wrong. If you mischaracterize the abilities, your description of potential problems is inaccurate. As I'll describe, Levine's broad-strokes account of the mind agrees with that of most researchers (and for that matter, with the observant layman): there is a memory system, an attention system, and so on. But it's the detailed structure Levine claims to see within each of those systems that really drives his proposed treatments for disabled children, and on those details Levine is often wrong. The second question one should ask is, Does the evidence indicate that



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his proposed treatments help? The answer is that there is no evidence, positive or negative, as to whether or not the program helps kids. Given the inaccurate description of the mind on which it is based, however, it seems unlikely that it will prove particularly effective.

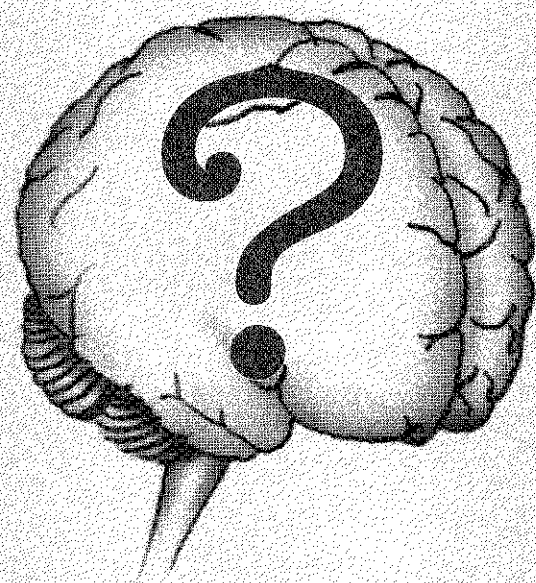
## Old Ideas in a New Package

Levine proposes that the human mind has eight major cognitive systems—and many more subsystems (see Figure 1). Much of *A Mind at a Time* describes, through case studies, what happens when one or more of these systems or subsystems fails. For example, he tells the story of Vance, who dropped out of the 9th grade. According to Levine, Vance was strong in reading and math, but he could not remember facts. Levine diagnosed Vance's problem as a deficit in long-term memory, one of the subsystems of memory. Despite a mind that worked well in most respects, this one glitch left Vance an academic failure, frustrated and shamed. The case typifies those described in the book: an able mind is foiled by a single weak link, and the child is failed by the school system's inability to identify and address the problem.

Levine suggests a number of measures to help kids like Vance, some of

### Levine's View of the Mind (Figure 1)

*According to Mel Levine, the mind has eight major systems and several dozen subsystems, all of which are key to understanding children's learning disabilities—and treating them. Yet, there is very little—and sometimes no—research to support the existence of these subsystems, much less their role in learning.*



**Spatial Ordering**

**Sequential Ordering**

**Memory**
- Active Working Memory
- Short-Term Memory
- Long-Term Memory

**Language**

Levels of Language
- Metalinguistics
- Discourse
- Syntax
- Semantics
- Morphemes
- Phonemes

Automatic vs. Literate
Basic vs. Higher
Concrete vs. Abstract
Receptive vs. Expressive

**Higher Thinking**
- Concepts
- Critical Thinking
- Problem Solving
- Creativity
- Rules

**Motor Control**
- Gross Motor
- Fine Motor
- Graphomotor
- Oromotor
- Musical

**Social Thinking**
- Social Language
- Social Behavior

**Attention**

**Mental Energy**
- Alertness
- Mental Effort
- Sleep/Arousal
- Consistency

**Intake Control**
- Selection Control
- Depth and Detail Control
- Mind Activity Control
- Span Control
- Satisfaction Control

**Output Control**
- Previewing Control
- Options Control
- Pace Control
- Reinforcement Control
- Quality Control

**SOURCE:** Compiled by author, based on *A Mind at a Time*, by Mel Levine (Simon & Schuster, 2002)



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which are standard practice in the field—for example, accommodations or workarounds in the classroom. The child with a long-term memory problem might be permitted to use notes during a test; the idea is that with this long-term memory support, Vance will be able to show his cognitive strengths such as analytic skills or effective writing. Levine also suggests that teachers take care not to accidentally embarrass children with learning disabilities. For example, Vance's teacher should ensure that other children don't know that he has any accommodation.

In fact, the same common treatment practices that Levine suggests are rooted in assumptions about the nature of learning disabilities. For example, the strategy of allowing accommodations is based on the widely accepted belief among educational and cognitive psychologists that learning disabilities may strike a specific cognitive process, like memory, but leave others, like attention, intact. As to the emphasis on the students' dignity, that too is based on the consensus view that learning disabilities are inborn and specific. The disabled child is not stupid or lazy and should not be blamed for his or her problem.

Levine argues forcefully that learning disabilities are inborn and specific. Both propositions, however, are already well known to those in the field. In 2002, the same year that Levine published *A Mind at a Time*, ten different national organizations, including the Department of Education and the Learning Disabilities Association of America, released a report describing points of consensus about learning disabilities. These two points—and others that Levine proposes—were among them. One could argue, on Levine's behalf, that some parents and teachers do not share these beliefs and that *A Mind at a Time* is meant to bring important research conclusions to a broader public. The problem, however, is that Levine departs from these consensus conclusions to make a host of claims about learning disabilities that are not supported by solid research.

## Levine's Theory

Let's examine the architecture of the mind that Levine proposes, which serves as the theoretical backdrop for his analysis of learning disabilities. Most researchers in cognitive science (and of learning disabilities) would agree with the top level of the hierarchy in

**Levine's broad-strokes account of the mind agrees with that of most researchers. But it's the detailed structure Levine claims to see that really drives his proposed treatments for disabled children, and is often wrong.**

Figure 1: attention, memory, and motor control are separate, though interactive, systems. The separability is important because it implies that if a system is faulty, the other systems might still operate well. But these systems do interact; it's obvious that if you don't pay attention in class (due to a faulty attention system), you don't learn, even if your memory system works well. (I will return to the question of interactions below.)

Although the top level of the hierarchy is standard stuff, the second and third levels of the hierarchy he proposes are anything but. And that's the part of the theory that Levine puts to work. Children are diagnosed and treated using concepts at the second and third level of the hierarchy. In some cases, the specific subsystems Levine identifies arguably exist—there are probably different levels of language processing much like those mentioned by Levine—but there is no research, for example, to support the existence of his 5 subprocesses of "higher order thinking" nor his 14 subprocesses of attention.

Levine's view of sequential ordering is also inconsistent with the evidence. He appears to assign any function involving time to this process, from dribbling a basketball to punctuality. In fact, although dribbling a basketball entails timing, it is an unusual case of sequencing because the movement is largely repetitive. And there is no reason to think that keeping appointments calls on sequencing—it calls on a type of memory scientists call prospective memory. In another odd distinction, Levine argues that "automatic" language (informal speech used with peers) differs fundamentally from "literate" language (formal speech used in the classroom). These types of speech do not differ in kind, as Levine claims, but differ because the latter is more demanding than the former—formal speech is more explicit and uses a wider vocabulary. That's why, as Levine notes, some kids can speak fluently to their friends, but are inarticulate in class. If the subsystems were separate, as he claims, one should also see the opposite pattern: kids who speak articulately in the classroom, but cannot speak informally to their parents and peers.

## Seeing Is Believing

How did Levine come to his particular theory of the mind?

Since *A Mind at a Time* contains few references to the scientific literature, I telephoned All Kinds of Minds and asked the associate director of research if there was a more research-oriented



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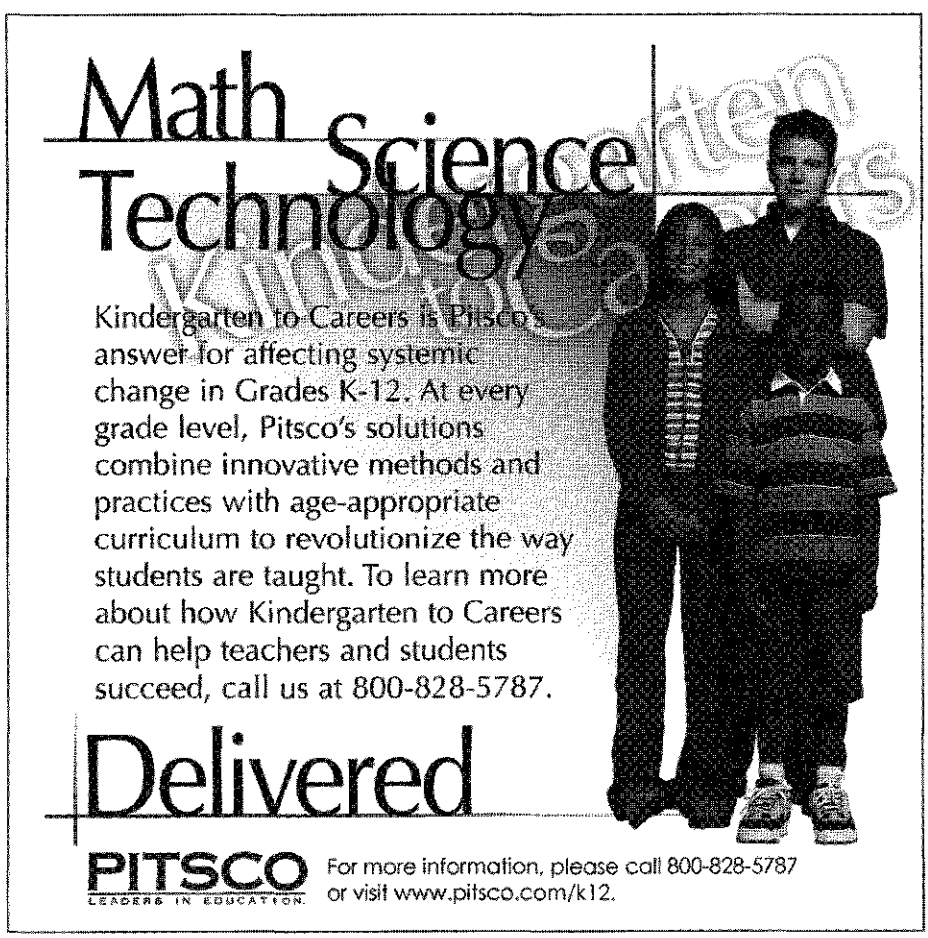
publication that I might read. She directed me to the web site of Schools Attuned, the teacher training program Levine established to promote his prescriptions for handling learning-disabled students, which lists the "research base" for the program. This research base consists of eight works, all by Levine and coauthors, none of which appeared in a peer-reviewed journal.

A review of these works reveals that they do not marshal research evidence to support their conclusions. Instead, they present the same ideas contained in *A Mind at a Time*, citing a few references that support well-accepted ideas—for example, that attention capacity is limited—but none to shore up Levine's particular views. Sometimes the citation makes no sense whatever, as when Levine and coauthor Martha Reed cite a 1993 paper by Richard McKee and Larry Squire for the idea that declarative knowledge is consolidated in categories, enabling growth in knowledge as the child gets older. In fact, the McKee and Squire study had nothing to do with the categorization of declarative knowledge—it was an investigation of the neural basis of a memory paradigm often used in infants.

Since Levine makes little use of existing research on the mind's function, it would appear that he leans heavily on his interpretations of clinical cases that he sees in his practice. Clinical case studies are always dangerous sources of evidence because there is a tendency to "see" in these cases what one's theory leads one to expect. Even setting that problem aside, Levine makes some mistakes in interpreting his clinical observations.

One problem lies in Levine's moving from children's symptoms to the hypothetical disabled cognitive systems underlying them. A classic mistake in neuropsychology is assuming that the intact mind is a mirror reflection of the impaired mind. To use a well-known analogy, if you damage a transistor in a radio and the sound becomes fuzzy, it would be a mistake to assume that a normally functioning transistor is a fuzz suppressor. In the same way, it is a mistake to assume that a cognitive subsystem must lie behind every observed clinical symptom. Levine relies on such logic, however, to validate the subsystems in his theory. According to Levine, a faulty "previewing control" subsystem makes a child impulsive. A faulty "quality control" subsystem makes a child careless in monitoring how well a task is going. These behaviors are not proof of different cognitive subsystems; they are symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Levine disagrees, and he points to the fact that different children show different symptoms. If the same cognitive subsystem were impaired, he reasons, one would observe the same symptoms, but since kids have different symptoms, different cognitive subsystems must be impaired. But variability in symptoms need not indicate different disorders. For example, patients with clinical depression may show many or few of these symptoms: change in appetite, change in sleep pattern, restlessness, difficulty concentrating, and fatigue. We do not differentiate a different *type* of depression for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each pattern of symptoms because the underlying causes of depression are the same. Similarly, there is no clear evidence for Levine's distinctions among different types of attention disorders, which he bases on different symptom patterns.

Levine also makes an error in logic when he considers motivation. He believes that all children want to succeed (which is easy to believe), but he takes that to mean that there is no variation in motivation (which is not easy to believe). In *The Myth of Laziness*, where he argues that people who appear lazy actually have "output failure," Levine says that the subsystems supporting overt behavior are faulty. Levine describes a student who had a memory problem that led to poor spelling and writing (among other problems), which in turn made his work look careless. Levine's sensitivity is to be applauded—no doubt some students who appear lazy have a learning disability. But it is just as certain that children vary in their motivation to succeed, due to a myriad of factors, including their home environment. It is a logical error to assert that because some children's apparent laziness is due to a learning disability, *all* children who appear to lack motivation must have a learning disability.

Another mistake of interpretation that Levine makes is diminishing the importance of the interaction of cognitive systems. Most of the systems and subsystems Levine identifies depend on attention: it is necessary for the successful deployment of memory, problem solving, reasoning, language, and so on. Similarly, a limited working memory capacity—the "workbench of the mind," where complex thought occurs—reduces one's reasoning ability, while problem solving is profoundly influenced by long-term memory, and so on. Levine acknowledges such interactions here and there, but he never comes close to giving these effects their due in specifying the implications for diagnosis and intervention.

## Doubts about Diagnosis and Treatment

Learning disabilities are far from completely understood, but some facts are relatively clear. Levine's approach leads him to take a contrarian view of two of them: diagnostic categories and the effectiveness of medications for ADHD.

Levine goes into some detail on the pitfalls that diagnoses (he calls them "labels") may elicit—for example, they may be used as an excuse to prescribe medication. He argues that kids should not be "labeled," but overlooks the fact that categories are useful (or not) to the extent that they *mean* something. A good category allows us to make inferences about nonobvious properties: for example, categorizing an object as a dog (based on observable features such as the shape of the head, the tail) allows the inference of nonobservable features (for instance, it has lungs, it may bite). In the same way, diagnostic categories are based on observable features of the child (that is, symptoms) and tell us something about nonobservable features (such as the neural basis or associated risk factors). Refusing to use diagnostic categories is refusing to benefit from experience to infer nonobservable features. In fact, we can surmise that Levine *must* use diagnostic categories to some extent.

Levine's research base consists of eight works, all by Levine and coauthors, none of which has appeared in a peer-reviewed journal.

If a clinician did not generalize from past cases to current patients, he or she would have to approach each case as totally novel and as though experience had no bearing on the treatment of the case. Thus what does it mean not to use "labels"? Levine does not simply mean that one should not tell the child, "You have disorder X." His comment in *A Mind at a Time*, "I have seen no convincing scientific evidence that [Asperger's syndrome] exists as a discrete disorder of some kind like a strep throat" indicates a belief that a diagnostic category must have a clear boundary of symptoms and that the relationship between the cognitive, neural, behavioral, and genetic factors must be understood before the category is useful. Psychiatry and neurology make use of diagnostic categories that initially did not meet these criteria or still do not (for example, schizophrenia, depression, Alzheimer's disease), but nevertheless prove useful. By demanding that diagnostic categories either be simple and clear or go unused, Levine throws the diagnostic baby out with the bathwater.

Levine also takes an odd position on the use of stimulant medications for kids with ADHD. Their use has been intensively studied, and the best research shows that they are more effective than behavioral therapies and that *adding* behavioral therapy to medication does not seem to work better than medication alone. It is also important to remember that untreated ADHD is associated with increased risks of substance abuse, teen pregnancy, school dropout, and other behavioral problems. These risk factors are significantly reduced by medication. You would not be aware of these facts if you read *A Mind at a Time*. Levine allows that "some children" "may benefit" from medications, and, elsewhere, that they "can have a dramatic positive impact on many." But he adds



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a list of eight caveats to the use of medication, ending with this one: "After a thorough evaluation, it is often possible to avoid or at least delay the use of medication, as other therapeutic possibilities present themselves." Trying behavioral therapy first is sensible, and it is of course appropriate to be cautious in prescribing any medication, but given existing data (and the medical community's consensus), Levine is simply too sunny in his predictions.

## Do Levine's Interventions Work?

How effective is Schools Attuned, Levine's teacher training program? As of this writing, the evaluation effort is in its infancy. Several research reports exist, but none is peer reviewed, and most offer qualitative, not quantitative, data with small sample sizes. All Kinds of Minds has provided grant money to independent researchers to evaluate the effectiveness of Schools Attuned, and that research is ongoing. It is worth pausing to dwell on this fact: there are virtually no data with which to evaluate the efficacy of this program, yet the program has been embraced by two states and by the largest city in the United States. Instead of reviewing studies that evaluate the program, we are left to guess at its likely effect on children.

As noted, Levine suggests that teachers make accommodations for students—for example, that the student who is slow in recalling facts be given extra time on an exam. Levine adds another prescription that is not commonplace; he suggests practice on the cognitive subsystem that is impaired. That is, some practice is directed at the faulty subsystem itself in an effort to improve its workings, practice that need not be centered on schoolwork. The child who cannot express himself well verbally, for example, is to tell stories at every opportunity and to play word games such as Scrabble. This strategy gives rise to two concerns.

There are virtually no data with which to evaluate the efficacy of this program, yet it has been embraced by two states and by the largest city in the U.S.

First, such intervention depends on an accurate diagnosis. If Levine's theory of the mind and how it fails is incorrect, some percentage of children will be diagnosed incorrectly and the remediation misdirected.

Second, Levine assumes that cognitive processes are open to direct change through practice. Some of Levine's subsystems likely don't exist, but those that do are known to be more or less open to practice effects. For example, long-term memory cannot be changed, but students can learn tricks and strategies (such as using visual images) that will maximize the efficiency of even a poor memory system. Such strategy instruction is a typical intervention for learning-disabled children; properly applied, it can be effective. Levine offers some good suggestions in this vein, but he also makes suggestions that are known to be wrong. For example, he argues that memory would be improved if school classes were longer, when in fact study that is distributed in time is known to be superior.

But other cognitive processes are very likely resistant to remediation. Working memory can improve with practice, but the improvement is quite specific to the practiced task and does not generalize. Levine's suggestion to exercise it with increasingly long arithmetic problems will yield little benefit. Also, problem solving or other higher-level thinking skills are very difficult to practice in any direct sense, in part because they are so closely tied to background knowledge. There are no general-purpose tricks to be learned that can improve them as there are with long-term memory.

Some of Levine's interventions are designed to help the child's emotional life, and those are both simple to implement and likely to be effective. As noted, Levine suggests that teachers avoid revealing to the student's peers that the child has a deficit. Levine also emphasizes explaining to the child why she is having trouble in school and emphasizing that the problem is self-contained; the child should not think of herself as stupid. I suspect that many sensitive teachers are already following these guidelines. Still, Levine does well to assume that they are not and to emphasize their importance.

Other Levine ideas are more novel but still deserve consideration. Students should not take the identification of a learning disability as an excuse for poor performance, Levine argues, but rather as a reason to work all the harder. Further, Levine suggests that teachers should request "payback" from the student for the accommodation. Payback could bring several benefits: it not only represents fairness to the rest of the class, but also communicates to the student that she is as responsible as anyone else in the class to work hard *and* that she has talents to draw on. These prescriptions strike me as insightful, powerful, and uncommon. Levine is at his best when he considers the emotional life of learning-disabled children.

## A Final Analysis

I began by asking whether Levine's theory is accurate and whether there is evidence that his program will help children. The answer to the first question should be clear; in scientific terms,



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*A Mind at a Time* and *The Myth of Laziness* are riddled with error. Even worse, there is currently no evidence regarding the effectiveness of the Schools Attuned program, and the inaccuracy of the theory makes it inevitable that some kids are going to be misdiagnosed and some interventions are going to be misapplied or faulty. Further, Levine does not acknowledge that a sizable fraction of the kids in special-education classes identified as learning disabled don't have a cognitive problem; they have an emotional disturbance or a chaotic home life.

These problems don't mean that Schools Attuned will be a disaster. The program calls for teachers to provide more individual attention, for parents to change the student's home environment, or for other professionals to be brought in to work with the child. Such emotional support and care may well have beneficial effects on the child's attitude toward school and subsequent effort. But I suspect that another program able to recruit the same resources from parents, teachers, and other professionals but based on solid research evidence would prove more effective.

**Levine is at his best when he considers the emotional life of learning-disabled children.**

The obstacles to recruiting these resources are not trivial. Levine is a clinician, meaning he deals with parents who care enough to bring their child in to be evaluated and therefore are probably invested enough to take on the extra work with their children that Levine prescribes. Special-education teachers in schools more often deal with parents who are not so invested. Still, motivating others may be Levine's greatest strength; he writes positively and passionately about the potential in every child.

Perhaps the greatest testimony to Levine's passion and power of persuasion is that decisionmakers in North Carolina, Oklahoma, and New York City have invested good money and staked the learning of vulnerable children on Schools Attuned, not with solid evidence of efficacy, but because it sounded good to them—they didn't have anything else to go on.

*Daniel T. Willingham is a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia.*
*Willingham thanks Rick Brigham for help in the preparation of this article.*


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# School Reform Economics

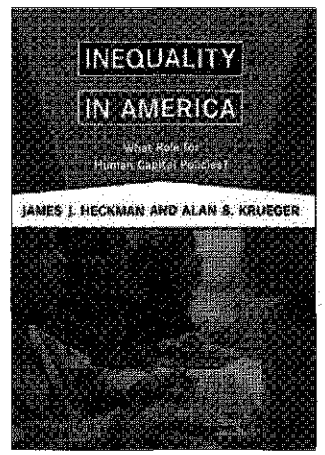
## *What Options Are Worth the Price?*

**Inequality in America: What Role for Human Capital Policies?**

**By James J. Heckman and Alan B. Krueger, edited and with an introduction by Benjamin M. Friedman**

*MIT Press, 2003, $40.00; 370 pages.*

*As reviewed by Martin R. West*




In the first half of the 20th century, a rapidly industrializing American economy intensified the need for a more highly skilled workforce. White-collar workers were in demand, and blue-collar laborers were being asked to follow written instructions, decipher blueprints, and perform basic calculations.

As wages for workers who could perform these tasks grew, so did Americans' appetite for schooling. School districts across the country built a vast number of new high schools and adapted their curricula to employers' needs. By the time the United States entered the Second World War, roughly 50 percent of American teenagers were completing high school, up from less than 20 percent just two decades earlier. This heavy investment in education gave the nation a huge edge over other countries in the amount of "human capital" in its workforce—an edge that helped drive the American economy in the decades that followed.

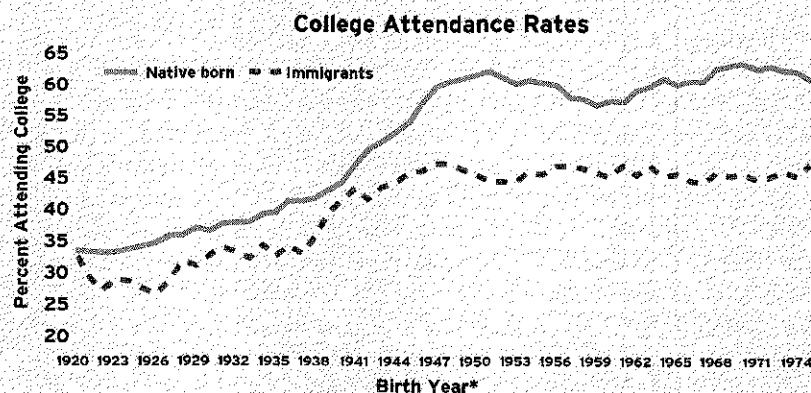
The time Americans spent in school continued to grow after the war, due in part to policies like the GI Bill that encouraged students to attend college. Indeed, for a time it appeared that Americans might actually be receiving too much education. When the first of the baby boomers entered the job market in the 1970s, many of them holding freshly minted college diplomas, the economic value of a bachelor's degree plummeted, leading Harvard labor economist Richard Freeman to fret over the plight of the "overeducated American."

But concern about too much education has long since dissipated. The students who came of age in the 1970s set a benchmark for attainment of education that subsequent generations have surpassed only recently, and then barely. College participation rates leveled off sharply for individuals born after mid-century, native- and foreign-born alike. While 62 percent of those born in America in 1950 attended at least one year of college, the comparable figure for those born in 1975 (and who came of age in 1995) was just 59 percent (see Figure 1).

Meanwhile, technological advances—in particular the spread of computers—accelerated the economy's need for skills, once again boosting the wage premium received by more-educated workers (see Figure 2). Yet unlike the early decades of the century, when higher wages quickly spurred greater enrollment, the educational response in the late 20th century was slow and uneven. Although the share of the labor force enrolling in college increased modestly in the 1990s, college graduation rates remained essentially flat.

**The Bloom Is off the College Rose** (Figure 1)

***After increasing steadily until the early 1970s, the college-attendance rates of both native-born Americans and immigrants have leveled off.***




*** Add 20-25 years to estimate the likely years of college attendance.**

**SOURCE:** Adapted from Heckman and Krueger, (2003), Figure 2.2a. Data are from the 2000 *Current Population Survey*



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In contrast, education levels elsewhere in the developed world continue to rise, with college graduation rates increasing roughly 5 percentage points among the other countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) over the past 20 years alone. As a result, America's long-standing international advantage in the share of its adult population with college degrees, while still sizable, shows signs of eroding (see Figure 3).

Recent high school graduation statistics are even more alarming. The percentage of American students completing high school has actually fallen since 1970—a trend masked in official statistics by the growing number of students receiving alternative credentials like the General Educational Development, or GED, certificate. This decline, along with the arrival of a sizable immigrant population that has relatively little education, has bequeathed the United States a pool of low-skilled adults exceptional in the developed world.

In short, America's supply of educated workers is simply not keeping up with demand.

## A Hard Row to Read

Why not? And what, if anything, should the government do about it? These were the questions put to Alan Krueger and James Heckman at a 2002 symposium at Harvard University. Heckman, the recipient of the 2000 Nobel Prize for Economics, and Krueger, formerly the chief economist at the Department of Labor and now a professor of economics at Princeton University, have long been among the most prominent observers of the policies that affect the skills of the American workforce. Their answers, along with the discussion they provoked among such authorities as Harvard president Lawrence Summers and Stanford economist Eric Hanushek, have now been compiled in this important volume from MIT Press.

Before running out to purchase a copy of *Inequality in America*, however, readers are warned that the authors have made disappointingly little effort to present their ideas and evidence in a way that is intelligible to noneconomists. Moreover, the book's format—lengthy essays by Krueger and Heckman (who teamed up with fellow economist Pedro Carneiro, now of University College London, for his contribution), followed by commentaries from five scholars, each with a favorite bone (or nit) to pick, then by extended responses and final rejoinders from the lead authors—makes it hard to find the forest for the trees.

Recent high school graduation statistics are even more alarming. The percentage of American students completing high school has actually fallen since 1970.

That said, readers willing to invest the effort to make sense of it on their own can expect a healthy return. Krueger offers an energetic, if ultimately unconvincing, call to expand existing education and training programs for people of all ages, focusing especially on the most disadvantaged. In contrast, Heckman and Carneiro advocate reallocating resources toward the youngest students (especially preschoolers), expanding mentoring programs for disadvantaged adolescents, and raising the quality of the nation's public schools, not by augmenting their resources, but by enhancing parental choice. Together these prescriptions for enhancing America's stock of human capital clarify the range of policy options.

## More of the Same: Money

For Krueger, the flaws in America's human capital policies stem less from the design of existing programs than from the level of resources devoted to them. Krueger would increase spending first and foremost on compensatory programs for the disadvantaged. These investments will be especially effective, he contends, because low-income groups often lack either the resources or the desire to invest adequately in their own education. By the same token, Krueger rejects the notion that policymakers should focus new investments in education on a particular age group, such as the very young: "Old dogs can learn new tricks," he says, and the benefits of programs for teenagers and adults are apparent more quickly than those for young children. He would therefore expand education and training programs for people of all ages, from preschool to underemployed adults.

For school-age children, Krueger would begin by reducing class size and increasing teachers' salaries, especially in schools serving low-income communities. He would also increase the quantity of schooling by lengthening the school year (or offering disadvantaged students vouchers for summer school) and extending the age for compulsory schooling to 18. Finally, for those not yet or no longer in the public school system, Krueger would increase funding for programs sponsored by Head Start (programs for disadvantaged preschoolers) and the Job Corps (programs for high school dropouts) until all those eligible can participate—and expand adult training under the Workforce Investment Act.



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Implementing even a fraction of these recommendations would require massive new resources. Unfortunately for policymakers with fixed budgets, Krueger makes no effort to prioritize among them. He settles instead on a "policy of giving ample resources to local governments in low-income areas to invest in the initiatives they think best meet their needs—and holding the local governments accountable for the results."

Krueger says nothing about how such accountability might work. And why would he? If existing programs are doing the best they can with what they have, surely they can safely be trusted to put new resources to good use.

## Elusive Evidence

But does Krueger demonstrate that current investments in education and training on this scale could be worthwhile? He contends that the return on investments in education in low-income individuals compares favorably with the return on investments in the stock market. On its face, this fact would seem to justify increased spending on a wide range of costly interventions.

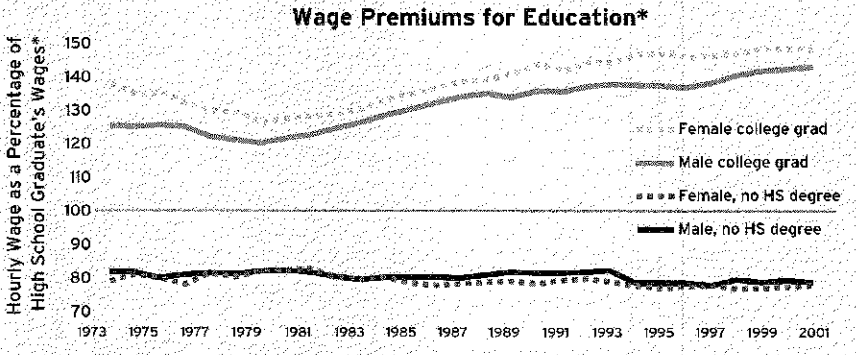
Elsewhere in the book, however, former treasury secretary Summers reminds readers that any returns of the Krueger program would need to be balanced against the cost of forgoing other policies, within education and beyond, and against the drag on the economy due to increased taxation. Krueger, even though allowed to respond to Summers's critique, makes no effort to account for these costs.

And a close look at the evidence Krueger uses to calculate the expected return on investments in education reveals that it is, at best, highly selective. Krueger mounts his case like a seasoned lawyer, presenting the evidence most likely to sway the audience to his position, all the while downplaying doubts as to its validity and ignoring evidence to the contrary.

To justify his call for class-size reductions, for example, Krueger relies heavily on evidence from Tennessee's Project STAR, a large-scale class-size experiment conducted in the 1980s. But it remains unclear whether improvements of the kind identified in Project STAR would justify the costs of reducing class sizes—particularly if it were attempted on a large scale. Although Krueger's own cost-benefit analysis paints a modestly optimistic picture, it ignores the fundamental tradeoff between quality and quantity that school districts face when hiring teachers. Likewise, Krueger's interpretation of the much larger body of nonexperimental evidence on class-size reduction (he considers these studies supportive of class-size reduction) is at best open to debate.

### Dollars in the Diploma (Figure 2)

***As technological advances increased demand for high-skill workers over the past three decades, the value of a college education, in terms of wages above the earnings of an average high school grad (the 100 percent line below), has risen. (Not having a high school diploma depresses wages by roughly 20 percent.)***

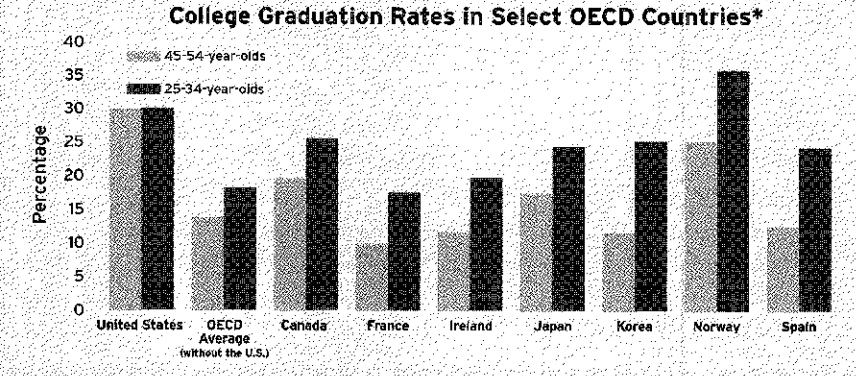



* Differential after controlling for age, race, marital status, region, and ethnicity.

**SOURCE:** Lawrence Mishel, Jared Bernstein, and Heather Boushey, *The State of Working America* (Cornell, 2003)

### Losing Our Edge (Figure 3)

***In other developed countries, more people aged 25–34 than those aged 45–54 are college graduates; in the United States these percentages are almost equal. This means that those other countries have experienced growth in college graduation rates, while American rates have remained flat.***




* Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

**SOURCE:** *OECD Education at a Glance 2003*



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The empirical support for Krueger's other proposals is equally tenuous. While teachers' salaries have declined relative to other occupations requiring a college degree since midcentury, there is no evidence to suggest that across-the-board raises would improve student outcomes enough to justify the expense, particularly if they were not accompanied by changes that would link teachers' pay to their performance in the classroom. Moreover, the apparent success of the famous Perry Preschool Program and several other intensive early-childhood interventions is insufficient to justify an expansion of the less-intensive federal Head Start program.

While the evidence Krueger reviews does not prove his program will be effective, neither does it prove the opposite. This is hardly surprising. As Heckman and Carneiro argue elsewhere in the book, "A purely empirical approach to assessing policy proposals is never effective, because the data almost never dovetail with the proposed policies." They go on to point out, however, that it is essential that analysts draw on "all available data and theory."

Fortunately, elsewhere in the volume, Eric Hanushek provides key evidence that Krueger ignores: the United States has been reducing class size and otherwise increasing the resources invested in the public school system for more than four decades. The results of this large-scale "experiment" are far from ambiguous: while school resources, adjusted for inflation, have more than tripled since 1960, student achievement has hardly budged. Meanwhile, as noted above, high-school dropout rates have increased, and college graduation rates have been essentially flat.

This dismal record indicates the need to reassess the nation's basic approach to improving education. Krueger's failure even to acknowledge the need for such a reassessment, much less contribute to it, is disappointing.

## A Fresh Approach

It is encouraging to find that Heckman and Carneiro begin their analysis with a discussion of the process by which individuals acquire skills. Their point of departure is the observation that skills acquired by a given time affect not only performance levels at that moment, but also the learning tools available going forward. For example, 1st graders who learned to read while in kindergarten not only excel on reading tests, but also are able to use books to learn new material more quickly. Likewise, students with a demanding 3rd-grade teacher may learn more as 4th graders because of work habits and study skills developed during the previous year.

Delay is costly. All else being equal, education interventions for young students should be more cost-effective than interventions later on.

The notion that human capital accumulation is a dynamic process has one crucial implication: delay is costly. All else being equal, education interventions for young students should be more cost-effective than interventions later on. It is no surprise, then, that most public job-training efforts have had disappointing results. As Heckman and Carneiro put it, such programs must "work with what families and schools supply and cannot remedy twenty years of neglect." They would have the government exit the field of job training almost completely and rely on employers to make whatever investments in adult workers will be profitable.

In contrast, programs for very young students should be especially cost-effective. Here Heckman and Carneiro call attention to the evidence demonstrating that intensive intervention programs for disadvantaged preschoolers can be quite successful. They are quick to acknowledge the limitations of this research, in particular, the small number of programs that have been rigorously evaluated. Nonetheless, they are prepared to recommend that aggressive (and expensive) preschool interventions be central to any effort to enhance the skills of the American workforce.

Heckman and Carneiro also advocate the expansion of mentoring programs for disadvantaged teenagers, such as Big Brothers Big Sisters. But they maintain that these interventions should focus on noncognitive outcomes, such as social skills, work habits, and motivation, which are more malleable at that age than cognitive skills. In fact, they argue that the cognitive abilities of eight-year-olds are basically fixed, in the sense that their IQs correlate very closely with their IQs later in life. This is not to say that older students cannot improve their academic achievement, or that such improvements will not reflect the acquisition of valuable skills. Indeed, the long-term importance of skills that do not necessarily show up on standardized tests is an important secondary theme of Heckman and Carneiro's essay.

Perhaps the most compelling evidence on this point comes from Heckman's own research on the GED program (first published in the *American Economic Review* in 2001). It is well established that GED recipients do better in the job market than high school dropouts without a GED—a fact that has led some to conclude that the program is a success. But as Heckman has shown, GED recipients also tend to have stronger cognitive abilities than other dropouts; after all, they



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passed a test to earn their credential. Controlling for this difference, GED recipients earn considerably less than other dropouts. The same characteristics that lead students with considerable academic potential to leave high school before graduation apparently make them less-productive workers later in life.

The apparent implication is that the GED has become a mixed signal for employers: it identifies the smart but undisciplined individuals within the larger pool of dropouts. The relatively low wages GED recipients receive, controlling for their cognitive ability, show that discipline matters.

## The Need for More Competition

Although Heckman and Carneiro devote markedly less space to the public school system than to the failure of job training programs, the potential effectiveness of early-childhood education, and the importance of noncognitive skills, they do document a "growing consensus" that schools' material resources are only weakly related to their students' earnings later in life. Simply increasing those resources is therefore unlikely to stimulate more disadvantaged students to attend college. In fact, they note, this pattern implies that the United States could be spending too much on students—at least given the incentives schools currently face.

Heckman and Carneiro would aim to change those incentives. Specifically, they call for families to be given more choice over the schools their children attend. The resulting competition among schools to attract students should force schools to reduce costs and increase quality. As Heckman and Carneiro point out, the evidence on the benefits of competition within education is limited—a necessary consequence of the lack of serious experimentation with meaningful choice-based reforms. Nonetheless, they make a persuasive case that "policies that promote such competition are much more likely to raise schooling performance than policies that increase schooling quality and do not change the organization of schools." (Though this is an example of the sometimes wooden prose that can make this book a workout, what they mean is that it's better to give schools more competition than more money.)

More puzzling is Heckman and Carneiro's failure to discuss the most prominent current strategy for encouraging schools to put their resources to good use: test-based accountability. By the early 1990s, several states were experimenting with policies that reward or sanction schools based on their students' performance on tests that are aligned with statewide standards. In 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act mandated that all states adopt such policies as a condition for receiving federal aid. With each student in grades 3 through 8 now being tested annually in at least two subjects, and schools' progress assessed largely on the basis of the results, there is no corner of the American public school system left untouched.

**Heckman and Carneiro contend that it's better to give schools more competition than more money.**

Heckman and Carneiro's inattention to the accountability movement is consistent with the low regard in which they hold evidence from standardized tests and with their emphasis on the importance of noncognitive skills. Throughout the volume, they are critical of analysts who evaluate education interventions solely on the basis of "arbitrarily scaled test scores" and of "proposed systems for evaluating school performance" (read: No Child Left Behind) that take this same approach. Their enthusiasm for school choice suggests that they are more confident of parents' ability to sense whether a school or teacher is effective and to act on that knowledge.

In my view, however, they are too quick in their otherwise thorough survey to dismiss the accountability movement's potential to improve the productivity of America's schools—even with respect to the outcomes they consider most important. While standardized tests are necessarily limited in scope, well-designed assessments can and do measure skills that are essential components of what we expect schools to impart. Moreover, the very process of preparing to take them can be expected to cultivate in students many of the same noncognitive skills Heckman has shown to be so important later in life, all the more if states go beyond the requirements of No Child Left Behind and create incentives for individual students to do well. Given that we do not yet know how to measure students' discipline, motivation, and social skills directly, setting high expectations for skills we are able to measure and holding students accountable for meeting them may well be the best ways to improve all of the above.

*Martin R. West is a research fellow at the Program on Education Policy and Governance at Harvard University and the research editor of* Education Next.

*The unabridged version of this article may be found at www.educationnext.org.*



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# Subordinate Clauses without Any Pauses

## *Why We Need a Language with Some Lawses*

**Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation**

**By Lynne Truss**

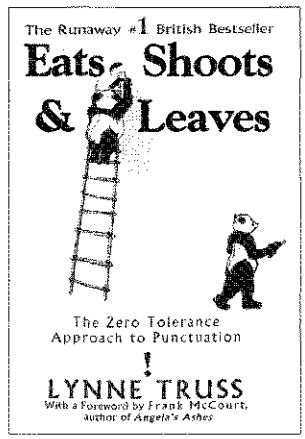
*Gotham Books, 2004, $17.50; 240 pages.*

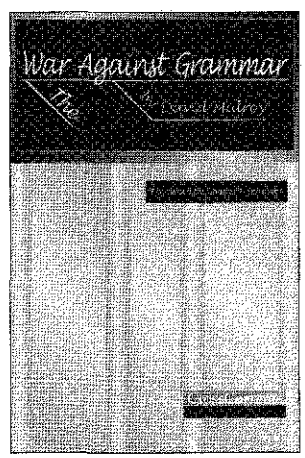
**The War Against Grammar**

**By David Mulroy**

*CrossCurrents, 2003, $20.00; 144 pages.*

*As reviewed by Diane Ravitch*


The Runaway #1 British Bestseller
Eats, Shoots & Leaves
The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation
LYNNE TRUSS
With a Foreword by Frank McCourt, author of Angela's Ashes




When I was a high school student in Texas in the mid-1950s, the study of the English language was an important part of every school day. Every student took four years of English, and half of each year was devoted to the study of grammar, syntax, spelling, punctuation, and speech. The other half was reserved for the study of literature. In every subject, not just English, teachers corrected our work if we made mistakes in spelling or grammar.

Thirty years after my graduation, I returned to an event in Houston and met one of my favorite English teachers, who had recently retired as director of English education for the city schools. When I told her how much I, as a writer, appreciated our careful study of English all those years earlier, she was appalled. "Well," said Mrs. Ruth Reeves, "it was just terrible imposing all those useless and mechanical exercises on you poor children." I was as disappointed at her reaction as she was at mine.

Over the past 40 or so years, it has often seemed that the study of proper English had died a sad and unlamented death. During the 1960s, standard English came under attack, not only from academics who considered it "oppressive," but also as a result of the celebrated rise of the youth culture, which cared not a fig for the King's English or any other conventions. By the early 1970s, organizations representing English teachers and English professors were insisting that students had the "right to their own language" and that dialects deserved equal status with standard English. In one policy statement, a higher education committee of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) insisted that a student's reference to "them flowers" was just as acceptable as "those flowers." Of course, the policy statements and proclamations by the professors and teachers were written in flawless English, but they nonetheless declared their independence from teaching it to their students (or "them students"). When the NCTE and the International Reading Association produced "national standards" in 1994, they neglected to include the study of correct English usage as part of their subject.

The consequences of this era of linguistic libertarianism (or Know-Nothingism) could be readily detected in the collapse of SAT verbal scores in the 1970s, the persistence of these low scores even as SAT math scores rebounded in the 1980s and 1990s, and the rise of remedial programs in reading and writing in universities, where professors became accustomed to receiving error-ridden papers from their poorly educated students. Eventually, it was no longer remarkable to see egregious errors in newspapers, books, and other printed material. To some extent, these errors were mitigated by the introduction of spell-check and even grammar checks in software programs. Even so, large numbers of students, probably a majority, have had no acquaintance with the study of their own language.

And now, much to the surprise of everyone, a book about punctuation topped the best-seller lists for many weeks in 2004. Lynne Truss's *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* was first a best-seller in England, where the author lives, and then in the United States. She describes herself as a stickler for correct punctuation, who flies into a rage when she sees anything in print, whether an advertisement or a street sign or an e-mail, in which apostrophes are forgotten or misplaced. Her rage is unbounded when she sees someone confuse "its" and "it's." Much of the book consists of examples of the ways in which punctuation can change the meaning of sentences or paragraphs, as in these two sentences:



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A woman, without her man, is nothing.
A woman: without her, man is nothing.

British schools, like ours, went through a long sojourn into grammatical illiteracy. Until 1960, Truss writes, every British school routinely taught punctuation. Then, for more than a quarter of a century, during the "dark-side-of-the-moon years in British education…teachers upheld the view that grammar and spelling got in the way of self-expression." Not until the adoption of the National Curriculum in Margaret Thatcher's time were students expected to study their own language.

Why focus so relentlessly on punctuation? Truss says that without punctuation, "there is no reliable way of communicating meaning. Punctuation herds words together, keeps others apart. Punctuation directs you how to read, in the way musical notation directs a musician how to play."

Why did this book become a huge best-seller? It's a mystery to me. Perhaps it is the book's flippant, chatty tone. One hopes it is because the public is fed up with the academic profession's indifference to correct English.

It must be said, as well, that Truss's book contains errors of punctuation and grammar. Her use of commas and semi-colons is maddeningly inconsistent. She writes of a "greengrocers' punctuation," when she is referring to a single greengrocer. She is "a-buzz with ideas," even though the word "abuzz" has no hyphen. Louis Menand, writing in the *New Yorker*, said, "Either Truss needed a copy-editor or her copy-editor needed a copy-editor."

David Mulroy's book did not reach the best-seller list. In fact, when I checked Amazon.com, the book was ranked 471,437. Yet *The War Against Grammar* is a far more consequential and far more interesting book than *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*. The latter has verve and sass, but Mulroy's book has important things to say to American teachers and parents. In 1996, Mulroy, a classics scholar at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, attended a public hearing about the state's academic standards and innocently suggested that all high school seniors should be required to identify the eight parts of speech in a selection of normal prose. He thought it a "modest and reasonable suggestion." To his surprise, he was plunged into controversy, supported by parents, but strongly opposed by pedagogical experts, who informed him that the NCTE disparaged the value of *any* grammar instruction.

**Questioning the value of basic grammar is like asking whether farmers should know the names of their crops and animals.**

After this disturbing discovery, Mulroy began to research the reasons why English teachers have become opponents of grammar, a proposition that he would previously have thought to be an oxymoron. He repeatedly encountered the view in NCTE publications that "decades of research" or "many studies" have shown that formal grammar is not only useless but also harmful to students' self-esteem and even their mental health! Those who were hostile to grammar instruction cast themselves as progressives and saw proponents of instruction in grammar as rigid traditionalists. These negative views toward grammar, Mulroy writes, became dogma in the nation's schools of education.

Mulroy's goal in dissecting "the war against grammar" is to encourage the teaching of grammar in grades four through six. He believes that this will set a strong foundation for all future studies of language, for understanding great literature, and for developing the capacity for eloquent self-expression. He can't make his case empirically, but his case is powerful on its face. As he says, "Questioning the value of basic grammar is like asking whether farmers should know the names of their crops and animals."

Mulroy's brief for grammar instruction is powerful and important. If I had the power, I would place it on the required reading list of every future teacher.

Mulroy's book also contains numerous lapses, mainly missing words, as in "The body of the report has been long forgotten, but its summary judgment on the value of instruction grammar [sic] has been frequently quoted in NCTE publications." Or, "No matter how well attuned you may [sic] to the secret harmonies of nature…." Or, referring to a book written half a century ago, "It was a valuable contributions [sic] to the development of modern linguistics."

Anyone who reads books, magazines, and newspapers with any degree of attention to correct use of language is aware of the pervasiveness of poor copyediting. It is in such places that we can see clearly the corrosive results of the accumulated influence of the "war against grammar."

*Diane Ravitch is Research Professor of Education at New York University and a member of the Koret Task Force at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University.*



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# A Method to His Mastery

## *James Comer's Enigmatic Model for School Success*

**Leave No Child Behind: Preparing Today's Youth for Tomorrow's World**

**By James P. Comer, M.D.**
**Foreword by Henry Louis Gates Jr.**

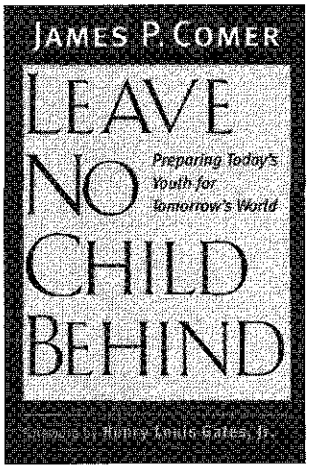
*Yale University Press, 2004, $28.00; 327 pages.*

*As reviewed by Nathan Glazer*

*Leave No Child Behind* is the most recent and perhaps the fullest account of Professor James Comer's approach to the improvement of schools and education. All of the competing models for school improvement that have been developed and in various degrees implemented in the past few decades have distinctive features, but the School Development Program (SDP), or the Comer process, as it is also called, is unique: it is apparently indifferent to specifics of curriculum.

But is it after all not a distinctive approach to curriculum—traditional or progressive, intensive or relaxed, free or prescribed, pluralistic or monistic—that characterizes the various competitive models for enhancing school achievement?

So how do we define or characterize the Comer process? Some years ago, a proposed model for school achievement labeled Atlas, which brought together the approaches of Theodore Sizer, Howard Gardner, the Educational Development Corporation, and Comer's SDP, received funding in a competitive process to develop the model and implement it in various schools. It was easy enough, from their works and products, to describe what the first three approaches were, and curriculum loomed large in all of them. But I became perplexed when I tried to understand the content of the Comer approach.




To enhance learning, Comer does not recommend any particular content as much as "relationships, relationships, relationships." "Good relationships among and between the people that influence the quality of child life, largely

To enhance learning, Comer does not recommend any particular content as much as "relationships, relationships, relationships."

home and school, make good child and adolescent rearing and development possible. Good relationships make student, adult, and organizational development possible, which in turn makes a strong academic focus possible." But note how far down the line the "academic focus" comes in this characterization of his approach. Indeed, as Dr. Comer takes us through his interesting and varied experiences in trying to improve schooling and education for children who are generally at the bottom in school achievement, we discover that, in contrast to some other models, his does not aim at or expect any rapid improvement in achievement. I should emphasize at the beginning that Comer is not indifferent to achievement; it is a key objective of his emphasis on relationships and psychological development. He knows achievement is essential to functioning in today's society, and the book has an extensive chapter on the ramifications of failure in school achievement for life, health, and income. But he knows it will take a while to see any improvement in achievement as he builds his foundation of relationships.

### From Indiana to the Ivy League

Dr. Comer began working with two New Haven schools in 1968. He came from a working-class black family in East Chicago, Indiana, earned medical and public health degrees, worked in various settings as a child psychiatrist, and had pondered problems of dysfunctional child development. He leapt at the opportunity offered by Yale's Child Study Center to go into two elementary schools in New Haven on a Ford Foundation program. "The schools were thirty-second and thirty-third out of thirty-three in the city on standardized achievement tests. They had the worst attendance. The student behavior problems were overwhelming.... The almost completely new staff brought in for the project was in disarray from the first day; almost all were gone by the end of the year. My first reaction was that we had to change the environment; children



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could not learn and develop in that chaotic situation." After five years, one of the schools was dropped and replaced by another. "Eventually the two schools in our project achieved the third and fourth highest-level mathematics and language arts test scores and the best attendance in the city." But it took seven years.

Building on the foundation of all he and his associates have learned over the years—they have since worked in almost a thousand schools—Dr. Comer writes that when they begin with a dysfunctional school they might expect improvement in five years. It is a rare administrator or public that is that relaxed in its expectations.

But just what do they do during those years of building relationships? One would like to know more than one learns from this book, but that would undoubtedly take detailed logs of daily actions and problems. The Comer process begins with a committee—teachers, administrators, parents, social agency workers, and, at the high-school level (which Dr. Comer does not discuss in this book), students. The committee considers ways of improving the school, and these could be very varied indeed. But the key, as Dr. Comer presents it, is that the members of the committee must not find fault with any of the participants (though there would seem to be much to find fault with), and they must operate by consensus. One has the impression that if this condition is not possible, the Comer group will simply withdraw. The process does not and cannot operate with conflict. It is very far from the Alinsky method or some other social change processes that look for and find a mobilizing grievance against authority. One hears little in this book about school bureaucracies and the difficulties they create for education reformers.

Dr. Comer does not think much of some of the approaches that are popular with many of the readers of this journal. He does not think school choice will do much, as many believe, for poor minority children. He does not think much of "merit-pay and high-stakes accountability, or 'reward and punishment,' to solve education problems." One could enter into an argument with him on the basis of various studies, but Dr. Comer would not be easily moved. His approach is clinical, and one suspects he would be more convinced by what he sees in a school than by a proper scientific study comparing it with others. But in the end, as I have noted, yes, he would be in full agreement that there must be a payoff in academic achievement, and that achievement tests show whether there is such a payoff.

What do they actually do in Comer process schools, aside from providing "vital environments and good experiences"?

But what do they actually do in Comer process schools, aside from providing "vital environments and good experiences"? The first reference in this book to anything one might call a curriculum comes on page 150, where we learn of the development of a "Social Skills Curriculum for Inner-City Children" in 1977. "The goal was to better prepare students to be successful in school by introducing them to activity areas where they could learn and develop the skills needed to be successful in life." Dr. Comer thinks highly of this curriculum, but there are no further details. The first reference to anything that one could call an academic curriculum comes on page 196, where Comer describes an "Essentials of Literacy" program. The six essential elements are "phonics, story sense, listening, guided reading, vocabulary, and writing." The program "provides students with a safe, nurturing, highly stimulating, and rewarding environment in which to develop their literacy skills." It seems to stand aside from the regular school curriculum.

The SDP has many success stories to tell, as well as cases where it had to withdraw from the school or where administrators and principals changed or abandoned support. The story is not very different from other school-reform models. Its successes are based on committed and energetic individuals and the inspiring role of Dr. Comer himself. Some claim to be proof against individual variation and effectiveness, but that would be far from Dr. Comer's approach. Clearly this is an interesting man, with a program that has been attractive to many schools. One would still like to know just what they do, and after this book this reader, at least, is still somewhat at sea.

*Nathan Glazer is a professor emeritus of education at Harvard University and the author of, among other books,* We Are All Multiculturalists Now *(Harvard University Press, 1998).*



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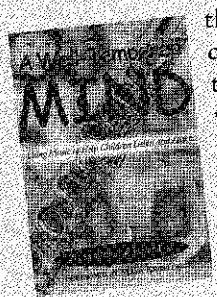
# BOOK ALERT

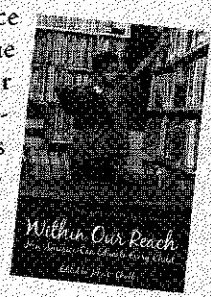
***A Well-Tempered Mind: Using Music to Help Children Listen and Learn,*** by Peter Perret & Janet Fox (Dana Press).

Before the advent of recorded sound, most homes could enjoy music only if a family member played an instrument. Skill at the piano, violin, or mandolin was thus a decided asset in the mating game. Even men were expected at least to be able to sing along. But amateur musicians can hardly compete with CDs and boom boxes, to say nothing of the media-plexes at the center of the modern household. More may have been lost than simply our common capacity to salute the flag with the "Star-Spangled Banner," say the authors of this well-written case for music education. Perret and Fox have used music to reach young, disadvantaged children and argue that learning to play an instrument is so demanding a task that it stretches the brain, producing connections that pay off in reading, math, and general cognitive skill. In his introduction to the book, neurologist Frank Wood points out that more experimentation is needed to know whether the promise of music is as great as some early studies have suggested. In the meantime, this lay-friendly book should inspire many a parent to find space in the living room for at least an upright piano—together with a Thompson exercise book for the little ones.

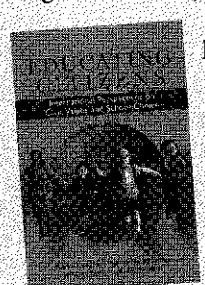


***Within Our Reach: How America Can Educate Every Child.*** A Report and Recommendations by the Koret Task Force on K–12 Education, edited by John Chubb (Hoover).

Teacher unions, many Democrats, and some school boards have attacked No Child Left Behind (NCLB) from its inception in 2002. But now, the Koret Task Force (which serves as the editorial board for this journal, full disclosure requires us to say), long recognized for its commitment to the NCLB principles of accountability, transparency, and choice, has issued its own critique of the ambitious law. The Task Force members conclude that the measuring stick created by the law is faulty, that state standards vary in problematic ways, and that the law fosters school choice in name, but not in fact. The Koret Task Force endorses the law's aims and insists that the law requires amendment rather than evisceration, but this volume provides plenty of evidence that it is not only apologists and union leaders who think NCLB requires some repairs.

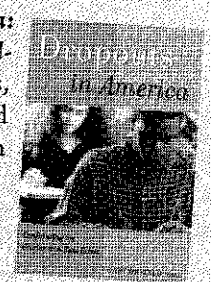


***Educating Citizens: International Perspectives on Civic Values and School Choice,*** edited by Patrick J. Wolf and Stephen Macedo, with David J. Ferrero and Charles Venegoni (Brookings Institution).



Wolf and Macedo have pulled together a rich, thoughtful collection of essays examining choice-based schooling in North America and Europe. The editors set out to see how other nations reconcile concerns about civic values and social cohesion in a context of school choice, and the knowledgable authors gathered in this volume respond with articles on the evolution and workings of school choice arrangements in Canada, Germany, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and England, among others. They provide a clear, useful analysis of how choice works abroad, how the state regulates schooling, and how different nations have addressed concerns about social fragmentation and threats to democratic values. The accounts document a wide variety of arrangements and suggest a tendency for government regulation to make publicly supported private schools look more and more like state-run schools. They find no evidence anywhere that publicly funded choice has had dire consequences. The closing analyses, by veteran American researchers like John Witte, Charles Glenn, and William Galston, highlight the manner in which program design plays a critical role in determining how choice-based reform affects shared public values.

***Dropouts in America: Confronting the Graduation Rate Crisis,*** edited by Gary Orfield (Harvard Education Press).



As every teenager knows, the American high school is broken. Many vote with their feet, leaving the school before graduation day, despite the urgings of adults who believe that mere seat-sitting inside a classroom will yield benefits years later. Useful essays in this collection document both the extent of our high school problem and its concentration at the heart of our metropolitan areas. Unfortunately, other essayists endorse what might be called the incarceration theory of education:



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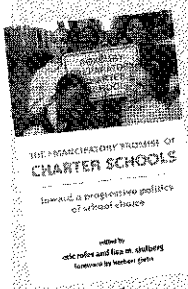
mere confinement inside the school door is enough to make something good happen. On these grounds, they criticize attempts to ensure that students are learning, for fear that accountability schemes will induce higher dropout rates. Altogether, the collection, while valuable, is unbalanced. Missing is the work of such scholars as the Manhattan Institute's Jay Greene, who both brought the issue to the attention of educators and has shown that the dropout problem was well entrenched long before accountability came along.

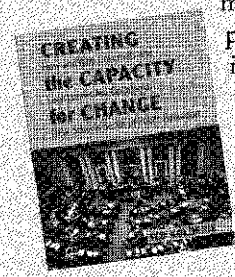
***The Emancipatory Promise of Charter Schools: Toward a Progressive Politics of School Choice***, edited by Eric Rofes and Lisa M. Stulberg (State University of New York Press).




The editors mount a progressive challenge to the "Old-guard Leftist" defense of the public school monopoly and embrace "a radical rethinking and restructuring of public education." In doing so, they seek to upend the established politics of choice-based reform. Rofes and Stulberg charge liberals with putting the interests of teacher unions and other political allies ahead of those of the children and the disadvantaged. They conclude that charter schooling may be the most promising strategy to protect vulnerable populations. The book's nine chapters are somewhat less stimulating than the editors' thesis, as they feature academic jargon and multicultural platitudes, with titles like "School Choice through a Foucauldian Lens" and "Native American Charter Schools: Culture, Language, and Self-Determination." While choice proponents always welcome new allies, especially those who can help frame choice-based reform as a fight for social justice, let there be no mistake that the editors (and many of the chapter authors) are hostile toward for-profit providers, skeptical about the virtues of competition, unabashed champions of more school spending, and eager to wed education reform to a larger agenda of redistribution and regulation. What any of this implies for the evolving politics of school choice is yet to be seen.

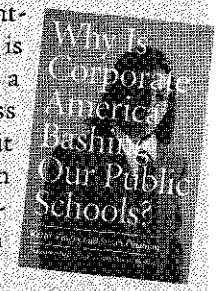
***Creating the Capacity for Change: How and Why Governors and Legislatures Are Opening a New-Schools Sector in Public Education***, by Ted Kolderie (Education/Evolving).

The premise of this book is that states need to move beyond trying to fix their broken, Industrial Age school systems and focus their reform efforts instead on creating "new schools"—charter schools, contracted schools, site-managed schools. That's easier, says Kolderie, one of America's foremost charter school pioneers, than scraping away the layers of entrenched special interests from the current system. All children don't learn the same way, he says, so we need schools that actually align with their individual learning styles. To do this, states need to provide real incentives for districts to change, and districts need to stop thinking of themselves as owners and operators of schools and start thinking of themselves as the "education board" overseeing a portfolio of individually operated schools. Kolderie imagines a future free of bureaucratic red tape, micromanaging outsiders, and indiscriminate demands. What he doesn't say is how to get the establishment to step out of the way.




***Why Is Corporate America Bashing Our Public Schools?*** by Kathy Emery and Susan Ohanian (Heineman).

The authors of this tirade believe that accountability in education is nothing more than a ploy by "business interests" to exploit children for profit. In recent years Ohanian has become a national star of the antitesting crusade, and this book showcases her belief that both business and conservatives are using education standards to root out "pockets of freedom and creativity" in education to produce a compliant, docile workforce. This book offers a useful window into the worldview of the anti-accountability extremists. The authors name many names of the evil pro-testing cabal. The villainous line-up includes Kati Haycock and the Education Trust, the Broad Foundation, the Business Roundtable, the Public School Forum, New American Schools, former U.S. secretary of education Rod Paige, and IBM. Ohanian and Emery urge teachers and parents to contest accountability efforts by turning to political action, lawsuits, and civil disobedience. Ultimately, what's disheartening is the authors' eagerness to ignore the troubled performance of too many schools and their passion for vilifying those who have set out to do something about it.



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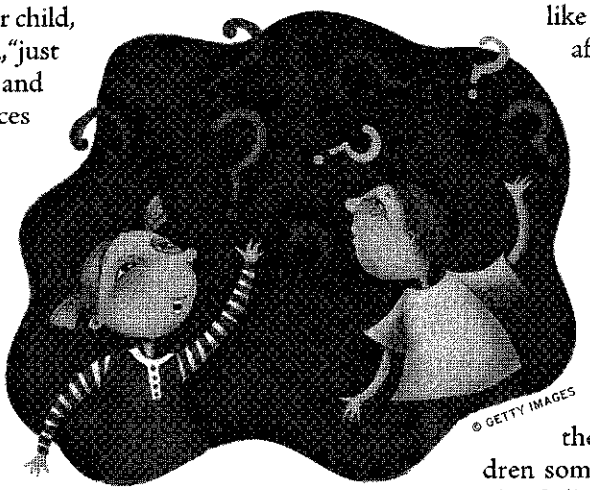
# A Story of Two Children

## *Why Can't Our Schools Acknowledge Them?*

by Bryan C. Hassel and Emily Ayscue Hassel

Emma attends a school where more than 95 percent of the students achieve at grade level, including Emma. But listen to Elaine, her mother: "This is such a bad school. I'm sorry, but it is." A bold statement made by a small, stay-at-home mother who regularly cuts conversations short because she is uncertain whether her concerns are worth the air time. Today Elaine has something to say, and she is saying it out loud, on the playground, and we all listen. Her child, a creative, bright-by-any-measure child, "just missed" the high math group last year, and Elaine did not realize the consequences until it was too late.

"I kept thinking [the teacher] would do the right thing for Emma. She was so nice and friendly. I thought she recognized Emma's talents. But it never happened.... Emma was losing her self-esteem." Self-esteem seems mushy until you see what it means for Emma, who now believes she can't "do math."




And what about Jacob?

Jacob's mom, Veronica, was single, worked two jobs to make ends meet, and refused to take free school lunches even when she qualified. Her son's district was offering a new choice plan and Jacob, African-American, tested at 110 percent of average. Though Jacob's school had won a national award for its work with poor and minority children and the principal was kind to Veronica and Jacob, Veronica had a nagging feeling that something was not right.

At Veronica's request, we looked at the numbers and found that the school's scores, by any measure other than a relative one, were abysmal. Four out of every ten students like Jacob—eligible for free lunch—were failing. Moreover, a scant few scored at the tier above grade level.

Jacob was capable of much more—his achievement despite great obstacles showed that. His mother knew he needed more. His school was content with less.

Emma and Jacob ride the powerful education sea. It ebbs, shifts, creates opportunities—and can destroy them. Policymakers and administrators, like waves, come and go. Their reforms affect Emma and Jacob, but they are not really made for these particular children at all. An individual child's success and joy—even in learning—do not direct the sea.

Parents stand ashore, typically with the right compass, but rarely with a choice about which vessel might take their kids where they need to go. Meanwhile, waves of well-intentioned policies carry their children this way and that. While these policies may work for some children some of the time, they rarely meet the needs of all.

While these policies may work for some children some of the time, they rarely meet the needs of all.

We wish we could tell you that Emma's school is firmly committed to tracking, and that's why she was passed over; that a simple change of school or district policy would do the trick. But not so. In fact, her district "mandates" differentiation—flexible, changing work at each child's level—to ensure that every child is challenged and successful.

But a mandate is no match for habit. And choice, as Jacob's mother discovered, is no good in the absence of good information.

Parents like Elaine and Veronica, and the stories they tell about their children, should change our measure of school excellence. They are not ideologues. They have no political agenda. They are guided by one compass—their children—as they navigate the education sea. Why can't schools do as well?

*Bryan C. Hassel and Emily Ayscue Hassel are coauthors of* Picky Parent Guide: Choose Your Child's School with Confidence, The Elementary Years, K–6 *(Armchair Press 2004) and codirectors of Public Impact, an education policy and management firm. The Hassels have two school-age children of their own.*



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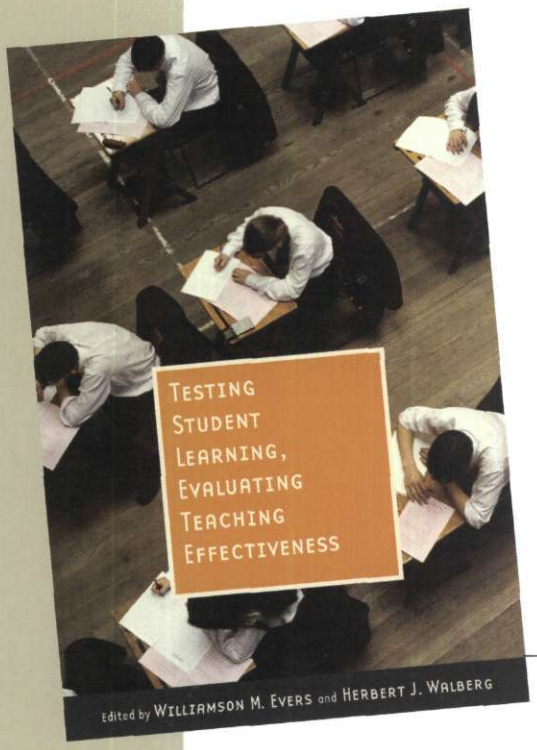
# Education Books from the Hoover Institution




## Testing Student Learning, Evaluating Teaching Effectiveness

More than ever, parents want to know how much their children are learning and how their childrens' schools rank compared to others. And even though some education experts may disagree, politicians and the public are increasingly insistent that objective testing and accountability are needed to measure the results of teaching.

This book takes a hard look at the professional, technical, and public policy issues surrounding student achievement and teacher effectiveness—the controversial issues that often divide educators from parents and their elected representatives.

2004, 296 pages
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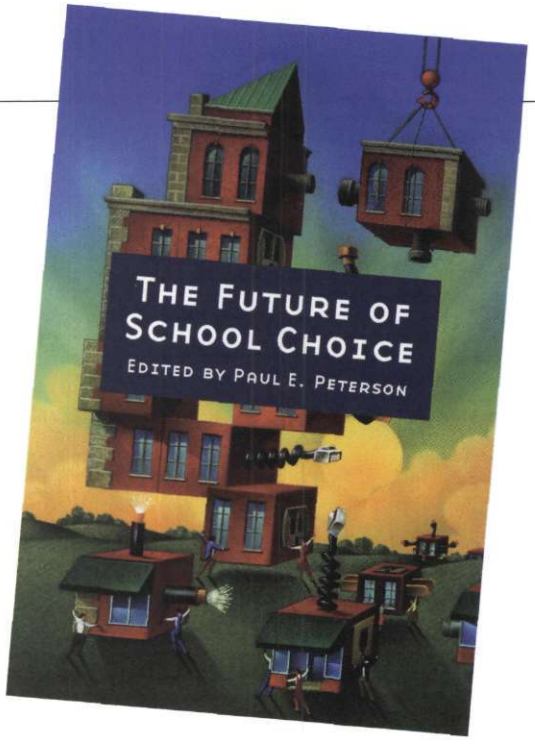


## The Future of School Choice

In the most anticipated decision of its 2002 term, the Supreme Court ruled, in the case of *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris,* that the school voucher program in Cleveland, Ohio, did not violate the Constitution's ban on the "establishment" of religion. Opponents of vouchers were predictably disappointed but pledged to fight on.

In *The Future of School Choice,* a group of distinguished authors examine the meaning of the recent Supreme Court decision and consider the new political and policy context it has created.

2003, 268 pages
ISBN: 0-8179-3952-0
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# Besieged

## *School Boards and the Future of Education Politics*

**William G. Howell, ed.**

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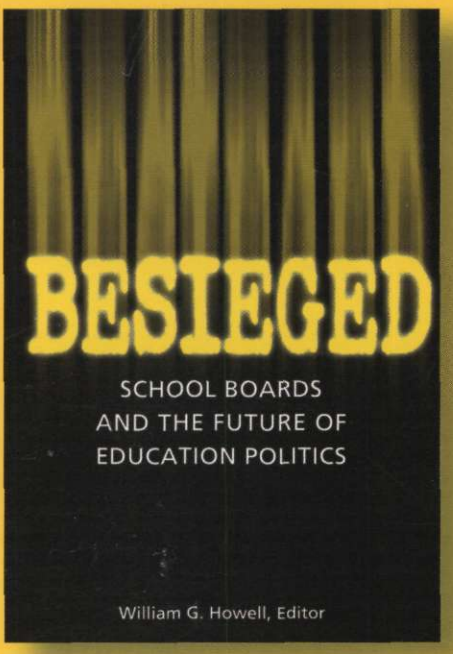
*Besieged* is the first full-length volume in many years to systematically examine the politics that surround school boards. A group of highly renowned scholars, relying on both careful case studies and quantitative analyses, look at how school boards fare when they interact with their political superiors, teachers unions, and the public.

For the most part, the picture that emerges is sobering: while school boards perform certain administrative functions quite well, the political pressures they face undermine their capacity to institute the wide-ranging school reforms that many voters and local leaders are currently demanding.




Contributors include Christopher Berry (University of Chicago), Richard Briffault (Columbia University), David E. Campbell (University of Notre Dame), Erin Cassese (Stony Brook University), Bari Anhalt Erlichson (Rutgers University), Luis Ricardo Fraga (Stanford University), Frederick M. Hess (American Enterprise Institute), Jennifer L. Hochschild (Harvard University), William G. Howell (Harvard University), Eric Gonzalez Juenke (Texas A&M University), David L. Leal (University of Texas), Melissa J. Marschall (Rice University), Kenneth J. Meier (Texas A&M University), Terry M. Moe (Stanford University), Nick Rodriguez (Stanford University), Mark Schneider (Stony Brook University), Francis X. Shen (Harvard University), Paul Teske (University of Colorado, Denver), Joseph P. Viteritti (Princeton University), and Kenneth K. Wong (Vanderbilt University).

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